

# 公爵令嬢の たしな 嗜み

4

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*Common Sense of a Duke's Daughter*

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## Chapter 088: A Storm of Thoughts

When Dida and Ryle left, I returned to my daily tasks; however, my mind was filled with the conversation.

“.... Ah.”

I misspelled a word on the elegant document I was writing on.

Meaningless words floated in my head-the word “carelessness” fully describes my state right now.

I put down my pen, and stretched out myself. From head to toe, my body made “creak, creak” sounds, noises that shouldn’t come from a young girl.

Those very words in my brain are all from that discussion.

.... Ever since becoming the Feudal Lord Representative, I’ve felt numerous times that some problems simply don’t have valid solutions.

But I never thought that I would run into this obstacle again.

However, the issue is all only just a big “if” .... Forgetting about something that would only probably happen isn’t hard.

I only have to lie to myself, saying that decisions can wait until the kick finally lands.

But, if I were to do that... Dida wouldn’t accept it. And all the deceptive crap will all be scraped away anyway when the time comes.

When it comes to that.... I fear that I won’t even be able to distort my own thoughts. I can already imagine the frenzied, useless state that I’ll be in.

Plenty of times, including now, people’s fates.... Have been in my hands.

People end up dead under a powerless lord.

.... But this time, the situation’s severity is on a whole other level.

I have to take responsibility, responsibility of the people’s destinies.

I’ll be held liable for human lives, nothing I’ve ever experienced is at this level.

.... Forget about the “previous life”, even “I” in this current life have never taken such an accountability.

*\*TL note: Iris is saying that even though she’s been sort of “in charge” of people’s fates (financially and culturally), she’s never really been responsible for human lives so directly. Of course, she’s talking about the possible upcoming war.*

Reincarnation in a world where nobody is harmed would be the best.

Then, no matter who, anyone will receive kindness and generosity.

Nobody will have to feel any pain, just as fairy tales describe. Darkness will be smothered up like a big candy wrapper.

No, if this were still a game.... Iris will probably take on all of the filthiness as the antagonist. But honestly, worlds where everyone is treated affectionately don’t exist.

No matter what, this world is still real.

If not, I wouldn’t be able to see people this clearly into their hearts.

All kinds of thoughts and ideals swirl around like a storm. Aristocrats steal people’s rights and power with dark, ugly faces.

Children’s fables will definitely not mention the abyss between the filthy rich and the impoverished poor.

Each of these thoughts made me come up with more.

All of these ideas were the reason why I was so stressed out.

... I should ask Tanya to bring something to drink, I can’t work like this.

I stopped my inner monologue, and was just about to call her name....

“.... Ah, kya~....”

The little tower of documents fell over. Countless papers fluttered in the air.

Oh, no.

The files that I had so laboriously organized were in a mess. I thought about how long and difficult it would be to rearrange them, and was finally fed up.

“.... Tanya.”

“Yes, I’m here.”

“Apologies, but I’m going to the salon. Please pass the message to others, and prepare tea. Also, will you please reorganize these files for me?”

“Yes, I understand.”

I threw all of my work aside, and finally took a break.

## Chapter 089: Okaa-sama's Past

*\*Okaa-sama means "Mother". This chapter is a dialogue between Iris and Mellice Armelia.*

*Oto-sama means "Father". That is Louis Armelia. Also, this chapter heavily references to the prequel of this novel, "Common Sense of a Warrior".*

I sipped my tea elegantly in the salon.

Normally, I would gaze at the decorative flowers, and calm my mind at their beauty.... But today, I couldn't stay composed.

"Fuahh..."

"Ah, Iris-chan, what happened? What's with the long face?"

Mother appeared with her luminous and gentle voice.

"Okaa-sama...."

"You, over there, I want the same drink as Iris-chan."

Mother sat down next to me after instructing the servant.

"Taking a break?"

"..... Mm, I'm just a little tired."

"You can't bet your life on your work. Ugh, you're just like your father."

Okaa-sama's "fufufu" chuckling was beautiful, as always.

Even the lifting of her teacup to her lips was charming. Even though she was my mother, I felt taken aback.

"Really, only because you're tired? Do you have anything else on your mind?"

Hearing Mother's words, I tensed up in surprise.

Is someone like me really that readable?

".... Iris-chan, do you want to take a walk outside? If you're shut indoors all day, your thoughts will focus on all the bad things."

As she spoke, Mother snatched my hand, pulled me up, and started walking.

“Eh? Eh?”

Although she had a slender appearance, Mother was unexpectedly strong. She dragged me along her steps.

I looked back, and the servants seemed confused and frantic. They didn't know how to respond to her actions.

..... So I was dragged on for a few more minutes.

Somehow, I got on a horse cart, and we wobbled forward for ten or so minutes.

We climbed up a long, daunting set of cobblestone stairs.

Finally, I stood on top of a high tower overlooking the Royal City.

“.... So pretty....”

I sighed in appreciation of the view.

We were close to the floating clouds, and warm sunlight enveloped my body.

Under the sun's brilliance, the Royal City looked even more alluring than usual.

“Mm, indeed, Iris-chan.”

“Okaa-sama, this is....”

“This place, is the watchtower for the Royal City Guard. Right now, it should be under the army's custody.”

“..... We were actually allowed in?”

Simply put, this was the military's property. Even as aristocrats, I was surprised that we could enter even as citizens.

“With your grandfather's name, it was easy.”

For Mother to talk about things like this so carelessly was really something to be respected about her.

“.... When I was a child, I would come here if something happened to me. So I'm naturally familiar with the guards.”

Mother smiled gently.

“... Okaa-sama, what would bother you back then?”

“Hehehe.... Like, when I got into an argument with my father, or when I lost in combat against him.”

Mother looked very cheerful as she spoke.

“Also, I would come here when one of my dreams fell apart.”

“Okaa-sama’s, dreams? ..... Okaa-sama, what kind....”

Mother’s dreams... I couldn’t imagine at all.

This person, dubbed the “Flower of Society”, is praised with honor and awe nationwide.

I felt that no matter what she wanted, she would definitely get it.

I couldn’t imagine a single dream that Mother would have given up.

“Back then, I wanted to serve in the military.”

My pupils dilated as I heard the startling answer.

“... In the military?”

“Mm.... I trained in combat from a young age. That was because my mother’s life was taken away by bandits.”

As I listened to this completely unknown story, I was taken back again.

“My father’s grief back then was really something. The person who won many victories, and maintained the security of his kingdom.... He would have never thought that he would be powerless to protect his wife, and even less that her life was taken by the citizens he protected.”

My chest hurts.

A glorious warrior.... The savior on the battlefield.

My praised and respected grandfather, wasn’t able to shield my grandmother from harm....

And, she was killed by a citizen of this kingdom....



“So after my mother passed away.... I started to study combat. My father didn’t stop me. I didn’t learn manners and everything the other aristocrat girls learned, but was just like any meat-headed boy.”

I didn’t know how to respond to this new knowledge.

This conversation with my mother has really shocked me today.

Because, this was *the* Okaa-sama?

To think that the mother who is labeled as the textbook aristocratic wife, never learned etiquette or courtesies when she was young.

“.... Was it because of my father’s teachings, or because I indeed did have innate talent, as my father claimed? Forget about the other kids at my age, I never even lost to the adults older than my father. In my memory, he was the only one I lost to.”

Mother smiled as she talked, but my mouth didn’t curve the slightest.

“.... I didn’t know when, but I decided to become a soldier, and protect the country just as my father did.”

“.... However, the people who took Grandmother’s life were still this nation’s citizens. Why would....”

“Indeed.... Just as you said, I hated the bandits who murdered my mother, and didn’t understand why my father would still keep protecting the country even after her death. Hatred, or just the desire to learn to protect myself? To be honest, I don’t even know the reason why I trained in combat to this day.”

A shadow fell behind my mother’s smile.

Under the sunlight, I somehow felt that Mother’s grin was fraudulent.

“So, that’s probably why I became like this.... When Father finally caught the bandits who were involved in that murder case, for a period of time, my heart felt extremely empty. Why was I studying in combat? I lost my ambition.... At that time, I came here a lot to brood. Why did I seek this knowledge of battle? I ruminated, and then some more.... Thanks to the dazzling panorama right here, I cleaned up my emotions.”

“See....” Mother pointed to the amazing sight.

There were seas of people, as well as beautiful streets and avenues.

“In each of these buildings, there are individual people.... Because they’re “living”, they laugh, cry, and have their own everyday lives. I thought.... What beauty this is, how precious this is!”

“Okaa-sama....”

“Yes, there are those who become bandits and the like, but there are also many helpless citizens. To prevent something like my family’s tragedy to fall upon someone else, to prevent people from weeping in sorrow, to preserve the spectacle in front of us right now, I would want to protect all of this even if it were to soak my hands in fresh blood.”

An abrupt jolt of understanding streaked through my heart.

“.... Then, you’ve kept that mindset ever since childhood...?”

“Maybe it was because I lost my important mother, and didn’t want to lose anybody else, that I had such a determined resolution.”

“Okaa-sama....”

“But, reality is cruel. As for why, it’s because the military restricts women from recruitment. A man who lost to me in a duel reminded me of that, and I crashed into that iron wall. My dreams shattered to bits.”

Those men were really.... Cowardly. I knew that it was all in the past, but I still felt a twinge of fury.

If I feel this way only as a third-party, how did my mother feel back then?

“Haven’t you thought of becoming a knight?”

The knight’s position was open to some women.

That was so female members of the royal family would be protected.

“I didn’t study combat to protect the royal family. And, to put bluntly, female knights are only a decoration.”

It was true. I nodded.

Female knights didn’t require a lot of skill. They were kept far away from battle, since if a woman were to appear on the front line, she would

immediately be targeted as a weakness.

“... And at that time, I came here again. But I was really hopeless at that time, since my newfound goal faded to mist once again.”

Her desire of revenge had disappeared, and her dream had died.

... After listening to Mother's past, I amended my thoughts about her indomitability.

“Then, I met your old man here.”

“Oto-sama....”

“Mm. Back then, his father was still the Prime Minister. He found this place also, and started coming regularly.”

... I suddenly thought, is this tower's security really alright?

Well, as long as there's nobody unfamiliar.... Right?

“I was crying right next to him, but your old man didn't take notice of me, he just kept staring at the view. It's embarrassing to think of it now, but I opened a can of whoop-ass on him since he was intruding the only place I liked to be at.”

\*

*\*I know it's unprofessional, but “opening a can of whoop-ass” sounds cooler.*

Mother started to blush, still flustered by her first meeting with my father.

“But, your old man educated me.”

“Edu....cated?”

“Yep. ‘If you're going to give up now, that means your dream only amounted to this much, after all.’”.

To throw such rock-solid words upon a crying lady did sound like Oto-sama's style.

And for Okaa-sama to talk about that memory so cheerfully, was her living up to her reputation.

“He asked me: ‘Why, did you train yourself in the art of combat? To gain honor within the army? Or to protect citizens? If it's because the first one, then

cry all you want. But if it's the latter, then is there really a reason to bawl?' He said to me."

".... If it's the latter, then is there really a reason to bawl?"

"Yes, indeed. Your old man probably meant to say, 'You've been treating your methods and goals as the same.'"

So that's how it is, I understand now.

"Your old man told me this, 'If protecting is your goal, then you've only lost one method, there are many more than you could possibly count that can hold up the people's lives. I myself do not wish to achieve that through warfare, but rather politics.... But even though I say that, I still have some ways to go to get to my father's level.' I felt a huge shock after hearing those words.... And I felt reborn. After that, I started dating your father, and gained a great amount of respect for him. I fell into the river of love alongside your father, and eventually married.... Then, I walked into another battlefield."

"Another battlefield?"

"Yes, indeed. Sociality is a completely different arena."

As she spoke, Mother smiled lightly, and looked very proud.... Her figure was absolutely stunning.

Then, I started to laugh.

It's an arena, indeed.

".... Okaa-sama, I'm very grateful to you for bringing me here today. Can I.... stay here for a while longer?"

"Mm, of course."

## Chapter 090: Resolve

When I came home, I really wanted to just sleep till the next morning, so I crawled under my covers after my bedtime routine.

But my mind was strangely alert, and I didn't feel a wink of tiredness.

.... My thoughts reeled the conversation with Mother and the view of the tower.

".... To prevent sadness from further tragedy, to preserve the spectacle before us."

My mother's face was extremely beautiful as she said that.

It wasn't really because of her natural looks, but more like.... I saw an affectionate mother who loved everything around her.

I looked back upon myself, what were my feelings towards my people's emotions....? As I pondered this, I laughed unwittingly.

Am I not the same as my mother?

When I met Miss Mina and the children at the orphanage.... Or, even earlier than that. I had already steeled my decision when I was touring the fief.

At that time, I wasn't involved in politics yet, but I had power. A power called the "Authority as the Feudal Lord Representative".

My path forward, as well as my responsibilities, is deeply connected with the people's lives.

That includes the piles of papers sitting on my desk. When I scrutinize each file, I always can feel the pressuring burden on my shoulders.

It's all to protect the citizens' way of life.

Haven't I had that resolve since a long time ago?

It could be because.... After the excommunication, that courage had weakened.

Isn't my existence absolutely beneficial to the fief's governance? If that's true,

then all of what I did and all of my progress has brought the fief forward, right?

.... It's always been fact that there is never a time to lose faith.

Because I'm already moving full steam ahead, my direction has pulled the citizens' lives and the fief in with it.

After all of what happened in the past, I couldn't still say "I haven't made a resolve yet."

I'm striding onward to fulfill my own dream.

I won't lose my objective. If I get lost in my way, then the people behind me would fall apart, too.

I should only do what I can in the best way possible.

As I thought about all of this, my feelings of displeasure and worry melted away, and my mind stabilized.

With a satisfying thought, I plunged myself into the world of dreams.

The next day, I called Ryle and Dida back.

"What do you need, Princess?"

"Mm, I just want to let you two know my resolve."

After hearing my words, Ryle widened his eyes in surprise. Dida started to smile in amusement.

".... Yesterday, Dida asked me if I was sure of my resolve."

"Indeed."

"Although my stance was wavering a bit.... After thinking about it, I figured it shouldn't have taken until yesterday to ask this question."

Dida's jaw dropped from my response.

*\*TL note: In my opinion, author is being a little filler-y and melodramatic.  
Urgghh just get with the story*

"Because, I've already decided in my heart long ago-I want to protect this fief, and shield the residents of this land."

".... To achieve that, will blood be spilled?"

"My answer is 'yes'.... But also 'no'."

Ryle and Dida tilted their heads in confusion.

"My shoulders have carried the burden of hundreds of civilians' lives since long ago. My mission is to protect this fief... And the lives inside it. If violence falls into the path of that goal, I will order our soldiers to action. Then, I will assume all related responsibilities."

Worlds without pain do not exist.

I've understood this long before anything.

"However, to prevent such a travesty from happening.... I will resist the hardest I can, until the last second. I'll seize every opportunity to prevent things from flowing in those terrible directions. Compared to agonizing over how to win wars, figuring out how to prevent them is far more superior. This is the most important priority, and I will follow this plan."

Have I switched the positions of goals and methods?

That is indeed a mistake I'm making.

I've always been thinking-if war breaks out, who is going to assume responsibility? What will be the Duke's position on the whole matter?

But, that isn't what it should come down to. Because there is more than one method to achieve our goal.

Predicting future events, and utilizing both intelligence and counterintelligence. My pen, mind, and words will be my weapons.

Military force will be my last card. But before playing that hand, I must learn to use all of my deck to its fullest potentials.

This is my true mission.

“But.... If, no matter what.... Force will be the only path to walk on, I will have to rely on Dida, Ryle, you guys. Even a drop of blood spared will be worth it. But I’m the only one who can shoulder responsibility, so that will be covered by me.”

After I finished speaking, Dida started to laugh for some reason.

.... Did I say anything out of place?

No, that was all in a very serious tone....

“A very elegant resolve... But also an incredibly naïve one.”

“Dida....!”

Standing next to him, Ryle looked very angry.

“But, alright. The reason why we’re willing to serve the princess is precisely because of what kind of person you’ve always been. The princess can go protect the things she cares about.”

.... Then, is that approval?

“.... Just spit it out already.”

Ryle spoke exasperatedly.

“Missus, we are your shield and sword. The wrinkles of your worries will be smoothed out by us. Whenever you feel that force will be the only path to take.... Please rely on us. We will defend you with all our might.”

Ryle knelt on one foot.

Dida also knelt.

“Mm, thank you.... Ryle, Dida.”

I don’t want to lose them either.... They too are what I wish to safeguard.

Then I’ll keep fighting, for my fief.



## Chapter 091: The Man's Anger

"If this is all you have, you can't even afford a single time! Penniless peasants need to get out of my shop!"

With a furious voice, he was driven out of the store.

He frantically tried to walk back in, but the door was firmly shut, without any sign of opening again.

"... Shit!"

He started cursing in anger.

Although it was daytime, this small street was quite dark.... No, the avenue was actually brightly lit by sunlight. But the passerby's eyes were lifeless, expelling a depressing, glum atmosphere.

In the past, this area was a commonplace for people who weren't wealthy, but also weren't dirt-poor.

It was a pleasant convenience full of laughter-even though that was a bit of an exaggeration, at least the people weren't as spiritless as they were right now.

When did it become like this? It dropped like a rock from a cliff, tumbling down, down, down.

Since when did he start seeing such shadows and darkness?

This kingdom, is slowly rotting.

With the decrease of wages, the tax rate hadn't changed a bit.

The average goods consumption of families will fall, resulting in lower budgets for guilds. Unable to sell off their inventory, businesses will produce less stock. This chain of reactions will echo in an unstoppable wave.

Even though economic relief and damage control for citizens have become common, they were no more than facades by the upper-class.

If they really wished to help the lower and middle classes with good heart, they should give us jobs, and money. Although everyone needed food and

sustenance, if we kept relying on their short-term solutions, what will happen when they stopped providing relief? Furthermore, people need more than just food.

So foolish, the man laughed bitterly.

Even if one were to not work, there will be people that provide food, isn't this not a bad idea....

With such easy lives, this kingdom is so considerate of its people.

But I believe.... This is no different from being kept as livestock by the people above, and I can't just accept that.

Has nobody realized the unstable situation? Or is everyone just pretending they're blind?

It's rotting slowly.

No matter what, people will ultimately become fed-up with the higher-up's decisions and actions.

The people are always the ones that pay the price for upper-class' mistakes.

To put simply, I don't have any money. Without money, I can't buy medicine. With these circumstances, no matter how much food I receive, it wouldn't help at all.

"You, over there."

A voice sounded abruptly nearby.

I looked in the direction of its owner. A cloaked figure stood in my way.

Although I couldn't see her face clearly through the hood, I could determine that the person was a woman.

"Yes, you."

What does this finely-dressed woman want to do with him?

"Your name is...."

The name that she spoke was indeed mine. Why does she know my name?

"Is that right?"

“.... Yes, it is. What do you want with me?”

“Hm, well, do you feel remorseful?”

“.... Ha?”

“Everything you had was taken away, and you’re even driven to this pitiful state.... No, not everything. What you should protect, still remains by your side.”

His mind quickly cooled, and he immediately made distance between them.

*“It should be fine if I’m not this cautious, right? It’s just a woman, after all.”*

“To not be fooled by appearances.... I understand that fact so clearly that it’s become annoying. Unfortunately, I don’t trust anyone anymore. Especially people like you, who pop out of nowhere.”

“Indeed. If you haven’t learned your lesson after being betrayed, then you’re really an idiot.”

His face soured from the woman’s words.

“Although I don’t know how or where you found that out, I’m not interested in what you want.”

“But I need something from you.”

“Then find someone else.”

I turned my back towards her. Although I’ll be angrier passing that closed shop door one more time, it’s better than speaking with this woman.”

“Alright, I’ll cut the crap. Do you not want to reclaim everything you lost?”

“... Not interested.”

“Really? I believe that if you do, your brother might be in a better situation than he is in right now.”

With that sentence, he stopped in his tracks.

“... What do you want from me?”

“Everything. Your name.... Existence, and all that rests behind.”

“Do you want me to wag my tail and beg like a dog?”

“I don’t need pets. What I want you to do is become my hand and foot, and work for me.”

“Ha.... What specifically are you asking me to do?”

“I’m not planning for you to do anything weird, you know. I just want to help you take back what you lost. It’s shameless work that will help you get back to your previous position, and nothing more.”

“How could I just believe something like that? Such innocent ordeals don’t exist.”

“.... That man is standing in my way, too.”

Compared to the sweet, soft tone she spoke with before, her voice sounded icily crystalline.

“He flies around, like a gnat. He sticks his hands in the path of my conglomerate, and that buzzing sound has been around my ears nonstop. It really can rub people in the wrong way. So, I too wish for that man to get out of our sights.”

With a *whoosh*, she peeled away her cloak. Her long, silver hair glittered under the sunlight.

He had never seen such a beautiful lady before.

“.... My name, is Iris. I’m the head of the Azuta Conglomerate.”

Listening to her words, the questions in my head grew bigger and bigger.

Say, isn’t the Azuta Conglomerate one of the biggest businesses in the Royal City?

And the head of that group... Is a young woman?

“No matter if you believe me or not, the gears have already started to turn. Even without you, it won’t affect things that much.... But, if you would work under me, it’ll really make things easier. I don’t want to increase my workload.”

With those words, she smiled bitterly. That harmless grin almost made my heart stop.

But, it wasn’t finished yet.

“So, this is an exchange. You will.... Properly use my name, and my power. I will also use your name, and your power.... How do you want to do this? For me, I’m perfectly fine with running with my tail between my legs.”

With my response, she smiled in a different fashion than before.

Her expression seemed to say: If you run away now, then you’ve lost.... Do you want to be defeated like this? Indeed, my indignant emotions sparked to life in my heart.

“.... I, will not do any work that I disagree with.”

“Then, that’s enough. We have a deal.... Come with me.”

## Chapter 092: A Man's Troubles

Although I kept my guard, I still followed the woman's steps.

".... Tanya."

Suddenly, she called a name into the empty air in front of her.

There's no one....? Just as that thought appeared in my head, another woman seemingly materialized to her side.

"You called, missus?"

"Mm, please arrange for a doctor immediately."

"That's already been done. We are waiting for missus' orders."

"Ah, atta girl, Tanya.... Then, what do you want to do?"

The conversation was suddenly thrown at me. My only response was confusion.

"What I want to do, that means...."

"We've already made preparations, so the doctor may go to your little brother promptly. Now, you have two choices-either trust me and have Tanya bring the doctor to your brother's side right now, or first come to my estate?"

My heart throbbed with a moment's notice. To be honest, I didn't want anything more than to have the doctor treat my brother.

.... But.

".... Let's go to your estate first."

I picked the latter. Hearing my reply, the woman named Iris narrowed her eyes.

"Well, why is that?"

"I told you, I'm not naive enough to trust someone who popped out of nowhere. I'll go to where you live, and properly discuss what you said. I'm not just going to give up my brother so easily."

After I stated my thoughts boldly, she started to smile for some reason.

“That type of thinking isn’t bad.... If you change your mind, just tell me on the spot. Oh, and don’t worry about fees. It’s all on me.”

“.... I understand.”

Then, we started walking again. In a while, we arrived at the main street. She boarded a horse carriage parked on the side.

The carriage didn’t look like something for public use or for-rent, but rather her own property. And although it was furnished in a simple manner, anyone with a good eye would immediately see that its quality was high-class.

.... So maybe she wasn’t lying when she said she was the head of the Azuta Conglomerate.

As I brooded, she called my name, and I returned to my senses.

Mm, then...!

I steeled my will, and stepped on the carriage.

As we kept silence between us, the carriage traveled for around half an hour. I felt that we were at somewhere far away, and saw that we were already in the thickets of the aristocrats’ area.

Our cart entered a place that looked extravagant even in comparison to other high-class estates.

.... Ha? The horse carriage kept driving forward.

“Welcome to the Ducal House of the Armelia family.”

“.... Duke, sama?”

With her words, he felt another shock.

Back then, I thought that I would never even come close to someone like a Duke. I never anticipated such a situation.

“Well, come along in.”

I was ushered into the manor by the woman.

I believe it’s safe to say that if I were to walk back by myself, I wouldn’t even



be able to find the gate. I would definitely get lost.

Before having everything taken away by “that person”, my past life was fairly well-off. But even so, I’ve never seen such a chateau like this.

At last, we walked into something that resembled a guest room.

Well, at least I wasn’t about to be shocked again anytime soon. I sat down in a chair.

“.... Have you calmed down?”

“Do you think that I have.... No, does the madam think that I have?”

Now that I’ve think about it, I’ve never really used any etiquette while speaking. If this were any other situation, I will probably be demanded an apology.... Well, if it does come to that, I’ll just deal with it.

This person probably still wants me to do something for her, so I probably won’t have to do anything now.

“You don’t have to forcibly change your tone and speaking, just learn slowly in the future.”

Although I did have that idea, I didn’t expect that not only did I not have to apologize, I was fine speaking the way I did.

Aristocrats typically don’t even see us civilians as people.... Rather more like ants.

Because of that, I thought that she couldn’t tolerate how I spoke with her.

“Ha....”

The evidence was that even though she said herself that it didn’t matter, the female servant behind her shot daggers at me from her eyes.

“.... Right, Tanya?”

But, she seemed to notice that, and directly spoke to her servant.

Because the master specifically says so, there’s no other way? The servant sighed.

“.... Yes, just as the miss says.”

“Then, let’s be generous of our words. The things I want you to do right now.... Aren’t much. To put bluntly, how about you learn the correct etiquette for your future job first?”

“... Ha?”

“From today on, you will work for my conglomerate as my hand. In return, we’ll help you get your revenge, and take care of your brother. That’s an exceptional deal, isn’t it?”

“Ah. This is too good to be true, so good that I’m getting really skeptical about any hidden fine print.”

“Hehehe.... What I wish is that you make good use of yourself after joining the Azuta Conglomerate. When that time comes, I will have instructions for you.”

“I have a hunch that those instructions will be quite daunting.”

Bread that falls out of the sky definitely has something hidden behind it.... I

wonder what kind of instructions they will be.

“... I am the leader of the Azuta Conglomerate, the daughter of the Ducal House of Armelia, as well as the Feudal Lord Representative of the Dukedom.”

Hearing her suddenly officially introducing herself made me shudder unwittingly. Before, I thought that nothing on this world will surprise me anymore. But listening to what she said, I really received a good shock.

Thinking again, it's fairly clear already. Since she lives in this estate, she possesses Armelia Ducal blood.

But I never imagined that she would be in such a direct bloodline, and much less have the same authority as the Duke himself over this land.

Furthermore, the daughter of the Duke Armelia is the woman who was excommunicated by the Church a while ago, causing massive disturbances throughout the whole region.

“As for any future repercussions, I won't be able to do anything strange or out-of-place. A part of that reason is because of my father, who is the Prime Minister. More importantly, I won't be able to face the citizens of my fief.... And, if I'm planning anything in secret, I would rather hire someone more used to that field than you.”

Although I had questions about the first part of her explanation, I could accept the last part.

Indeed, she could easily find someone else more qualified to do those things.

“... You've noticed, right? I was the one who was excommunicated back then.”

I found it hard to respond to that question. Seeing my silent expression, she started to laugh.

“I can tell the cat's out of the bag from your reaction.... Any moves that I make, will be followed closely by everyone else. My status as an aristocrat makes it hard to get matters done. Because of that, I need you.”

After that, she roughly explained what the conglomerate wanted me to do upon recruitment.

So that's what she meant by using my prestige and power. Strangely, I could accept her terms.

"... Then, do you accept our offer? If you do, I'll have the doctor properly treat your little brother."

Just like that, I struck the deal with her.

## Chapter 093: The heart's door

"...Will he be helpful?"

After he had left, Tanya asked.

"Who knows? If I can just use him properly, I will reach my goals. All I need to do now is make sure tomorrow's negotiations are successful."

I smiled recalling him.

"...But, with time, won't he grow as well?"

"What is your proof...?"

"Just intuition."

Hearing my answer, Tanya wore a sour expression.

Seeing her reaction, I took in my smile and said,

"He looked a little discontent when we were talking about his younger brother, right? When I had brought up the topic just for fun, his answers were always surprising. When talking about the national treasure and how money goes around too. Even though you will find a lot of people praising Ed-sama and Yuuri-sama if you walk around the city.... Being kept as a pet, huh? Quite the interesting expression."

"I see...."

"...Well, above all else, I liked how he wouldn't be won over easily."

When I said that with a smile, Tanya looked puzzled, as if she didn't get what I was talking about.

"I am sure, going forward... he will do work befitting of the favor I forced on him. But, that's all. He has probably made a clear distinction about it being just work and will probably not trust me otherwise."

Business-like. If he just does his work good enough, that would be the best.

"He would always keep the possibility of being betrayed in his mind. For the time when he really gets betrayed... Exactly because he was betrayed once

before. Maybe that part of him overlapped with mine.”

Although saying that made me a bit sad.

But, this is what I truly think.

He too has a very heavy door in his heart. ‘How far can I open it? How far to let them see the real me?’ He is probably always thinking of such things.

Same as me.

And that’s exactly why I didn’t feel any sort of discomfort because of his bare wariness. In fact, I could accept it as being only natural.

I was even able to empathize.

....Well, if he was to work at a firm from now on, I would like him to learn to express himself a bit more without words, though... That was how much he was exposing his feelings.

But who knows... maybe because he came colliding with me with his honest thoughts like that that I was pleased.

Even Moneda who is in the same trade guild wouldn’t do something like that and I can’t even tell what goes on within Sei’s head these days either.

Hearing my words, Tanya cast her eyes down, looking a bit sad.

Feeling a bit awkward in that atmosphere, I stood up to head to the office.

Tanya probably calmed down hearing that sound and came following me.

Returning to the study, I took a sit.

“.....Tanya, prepare something warm for me to drink.”

“Understood.”

While Tanya was making tea, I gazed at the scattered documents.

I do have the negotiation with that head of the company tomorrow so I guess I will refrain from working today.

After all, if I were to collapse after working till late, it would come down to nothing.

Suddenly, my hands stopped turning over the pages.

I had stopped when I saw the document titled 'The trade guild's decision'.

A company can open a business when its representative registers it with the trade guild and the trade guild accepts it.

As long as the company has that document, it can continue its business.

Even if the head of the company were to pass away, that permit document also gets passed down to their child as inheritance.

However, if the child is young and doesn't have any experience at work, a guardian can continue the business until the child can succeed the business.

In that case, the guardian is to manage the company while helping the child gain more experience and hand over all right to them eventually... or at least that is how it's supposed to be.

But... in the case of the child not submitting an application of inheritance of the company to the trade guild, that would be regarded as if there were no lineal ascendant and the company's permit would automatically be handed over to the 'guardian'.

And the only times another person can get the permit is when the representative of the company officially submits a blank form or when they don't have any successor.

Inversely, if that form isn't submitted and if there are no successors, in that case, the company will shut down.

.....In short, that was what the document said.

"Even still, to think it wasn't updated for over 10 years... that is pretty amazing on its own."

I said to myself.

However, it is necessary for the permit to be updated every year in Duke Almenia's territory.

There, they lightly ask questions such as who the representative is and if there are any changes in the products they deal with, *etc.*

It came along with the new tax report and now if the taxes aren't paid and these questions aren't answered, they can't update the permit.

Besides that, a sudden inspection is also done on whether they are actually doing the business they said they would be doing, whether they are doing anything illegal, *etc.*

On the contrary, at the capital, the permit is only rewritten when the representative has changed.

The permit not being updated for 10-20 years is quite common there.

...Well, one could argue that it can't be helped as there are way too many firms in the capital.

"Excuse me."

Tanya was standing in front of me, with the requested warm drink.

"...Ah, that reminds me, Tanya. You did quite a good job this time as well. Thank you very much."

I was reminded of how amazing Tanya's intelligence gathering skill was these past 2-3 days.

Really, what is she aiming for... that is one of the biggest questions I have.

"...No, I only did what I was supposed to."

Tanya answered indifferently to my appreciation.

However, her lips were making a slightly upside arc.

"You worked hard to get us this far. Now I need to do my work properly tomorrow as well."

"If it's you, my lady, I am sure you will be able to do it without fail."



“Fufufu.... thank you.”

## Chapter 094: Outfoxing

Now then, today's the day of the meeting with that company's head.

Alright!.... After getting myself psyched up, I got into the carriage.

The company I am headed towards now is one of the companies which pulled out some of my employees by taking advantage of my excommunication strife.

A guy who had made a fuss at my shop before...

The carriage stopped in front of that building, which was located at one of the most prospering lands, even in the capital.

I glanced into the shop a little. It seems like there aren't many customers in.

Sei informed the managers of the shop that I had arrived and soon we were guided into a reception room.

....The atmosphere here feels is a bit odd.

That was what first came to mind when I saw the reception room.

Many furnishings. There were dignified furnishes which gave off the same feeling as those in our reception room but, on the other hand, there were also some which kind of glittered and looked very flashy.

It almost feels like 2 people who had misaligned tastes did whatever they wanted with this place... Looking at the place as a whole, it comes off as very mismatched.

On top of that, the unnatural blank space between these products also gives off an odd feeling.

There was probably something placed there before.

As proof of that, one could see the marks of a painting which was probably hanged on the wall before.

....Are they in the middle of remodeling? No, that can't be. Surely they wouldn't let a guest into the room while doing that.

...Then did they perhaps sell it? The chances of that are higher.

While I was deeply pondering about that, the company's president appeared.

Gaudy. That was my first impression of him. As if he was using gold threads for his clothing. There were a lot of laces as a whole and seemed like heavy clothing for a man.

"Nice to meet you. I am Vuld Rankam. The president of this company."

"Nice to meet you as well. I am Iris, the president of Azuta conglomerate. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

We started off the conversation with a smile.

"Even still, to think I would be able to meet the famous Azuta conglomerate's president."

"Same here. I have quite the good luck, to be able to meet the president of one of the top companies here in the capital."

'Hohoho', I laughed while hiding my mouth with my folding fan. This style of laughing is that of an evil daughter's in stories.

Seeing that, his eyebrows twitched slightly.

Oh dear... did I perhaps touch his nerves already? I was planning on unnerving him after having a little peaceful conversation, though.

"...What are you saying? It wouldn't be an exaggeration to even call you the top in the capital."

Oho? I wonder if it's okay if I start poking him already.

"Oh, I am greatly obliged. However, we are just newcomers here. It's not like we have history here like your company does. Moreover, your company is also looked out for by the prince Edward-sama... Really, I am very jealous."

The moment I said that, Vuld immediately wore his smile again. I guess he got back to his feet, huh?

"...Thank you very much. But yes, I guess that is true. I am very grateful that Edward-sama is appointing our company to a very responsible post."

Ah... So you're going to use Edward-sama as your shield, huh? That is exactly this company's shield and lance.

"...By the way, the work of art placed in this room are very wonderful."

I changed the topic here. It is a bit sluggish but only a fool would go straight to his demands. The other party will just take advantage of a situation like that.

Even if we hold more power in terms of capital, that doesn't matter. The other party is trying to get the talk to his advantage by using Ed-sama as his shield.

To advance things the way I want to, I can't afford to lose focus here.

"...I am happy you think so."

Seems like the other party is also loosening up on the offensive a little.

"Yes. They are all very beautiful, I can't help but be entranced. If 'all' of them were together, it would have been quite the magnificent spectacle."

And once again, he displayed his surprise. Is my assumption a hit regarding the unnatural blank space?

"....We were in the middle of remodeling, after all. I am truly ashamed that you had to look at the incomplete state of this room."

His face while he said that looked as if he was trying to steel himself. If it were one of the presidents from our territory in his place, they would easily soften the atmosphere without showing any sign of agitation.

Thanks to my discussions with those people, I think my skills in these

situations have gotten a bit better. Better be thankful to those people... Seriously, now that I am confronting this guy here, I can truly understand how much of a sly dog the presidents in our territory are. I would really like them to hold back a little.

“Oh? Is that so? I am sure it would be an excellent room when all the pieces are gathered. What are you planning on decorating over there?”

“.....That is, still under consideration.”

“Is that so... sorry to have asked so many questions like that. After all, you’re Vuld-sama who is in good terms with Marquis Rudolf. With the help of Rudolf-sama, who has the greatest sense of elegance, I am sure you will be able to get something excellent for that spot.”

The moment I said that, his mask peeled off.

## Chapter 095: Negotiations

Marquis Rudolf was one of the nobles who was part of the second prince's faction.

I don't know what he thought but after he attended the commemoration party of the foundation of the nation, he sent me an invitation to a party he was hosting.

...Now then, one thing bothers me here. Why did he react so much to Marquis Rudolf's name?

The answer to that is simple. That is he wanted to hide his connection to Marquis Rudolf.

"...Sorry but, why bring up Marquis Rudolf's name here?"

"You are very close with him, right? So much that you were able to ask Edward-sama for your request."

".....!!"

Vuld was so surprised that his mouth opened wide in reaction. Ah, he gives off such interesting reactions.

Hiding my smile with the folding fan, I just silently looked at him.

"...More importantly, let's move on to the main topic."

"Main topic, you say?"

"Yes, that's right. It is about our management collaboration with Bennel conglomerate and Azuta conglomerate."

"If I remember correct, we were supposed to provide funds in exchange for Bennel conglomerate's location and personnel in the capital and other places... right?"

"Yes, you are correct."

"...I am sorry but, I cannot consent to that."

"...Wha!"

“It is certainly true that we need places and labour. But it would be fine if we just acquire them from other sources... I do not think I want them as much as to pay you the amount you asked for it.”

“That might be true. However... If I may say something, Iris-sama, I had assumed that Azuta conglomerate wanted to have connections with Edward-sama, though.”

There it comes. Using ‘Edward-sama’s connection’ as his lance and shield, he is trying to bring about conditions advantageous to himself.

However, I do not plan on agreeing to their terms.

After all, the fund they requested was absurdly high. To the point where it makes you wonder how they loaned such an amount of money...

“Yes, it is exactly as you assumed, Vuld-sama. We, the Azuta conglomerate, want a connection with Edward-sama to make a foothold in the capital... However, after thinking it through, we decided that we could just consult someone else. Just as your company consulted Marquis Rudolf.”

“How do you...!”

He didn’t even try to keep up his appearances anymore. He expressed his surprise just like that.

“Fufufu, our company has quite the big ears, you know? I would suggest you to not always find faults in your employees. After all, if they were to complain at a pub, it would spread very easily.”

This is why I appreciate Tanya. Really, her information gathering skill is amazing.

“Kuuhh.....!”

“We have gone astray from the topic, haven’t we? Even after you went to all the trouble to ask Marquis Rudolf for a ‘request’ to make a connection with Edward-sama and got labor from Azuta Conglomerate, now your company’s internal condition is that of a fiery chariot. It’s already in a precarious state.... If I were to reject today, you would have to close down your shop tomorrow, wouldn’t you?”

The ‘request’ was to have Ed-sama be a little partial to his company. In other words, he needed Ed-sama’s protection to take personnel from our company.

If that happens, it would be harder for me, who doesn’t want to aggravate the situation with the royal family, to complain about royalties.

Well... it is not like I am the only one who doesn’t want trouble with the royalties... it is the same for other businesses as well.

In other words, this would mean they would make the whole trade guild discontent so there is nothing to be afraid of.

Normally, when they try to extract personnel from our company that blatantly, we could also display our exhortation through the trade guild as well.

However, we were not able to do that because they were under the protection of the royal family, other than the commotion of the excommunication.

And because of that, our complains were all crushed.

Of course he wouldn’t want me knowing this.

Now let’s return to the main topic.

It was probably a good deal for Marquis Rudolf. After all, he would make profits just by being an intermediary to Ed-sama for the merchants.

And as it is a relation connected by ‘profits’, when the operation of the conglomerate gets this bad, it is pretty obvious it would be cut down.

“.....”

He was in a state of clear dismay.

“.....At this rate, you won’t be able to do anything because of the debt. You



have two choices, either to stop the deal with me and commit a double suicide with your company, or to cleanly cut your ties to the debt and the company and start anew.”

He looked at me with hate. Well, I guess that can't be helped.

He tried over and over again to say something, but stopped himself.... However, as if he just suddenly realized something, his restless expression calmed down.

....What did he realize?

“....Meaning, your condition is for me to retire, correct?”

“Yes. In turn for not providing funds to this company, you will not hold any connection to it ever. That is my condition.”

Vuld sighed and wore a smile. As if he had just sorted everything in his mind, he wore a refreshed expression.

But, seeing that, what I thought was....

Shameless — that one word sums up what I thought.

His eyes were flaming brightly, not matching that expression.

Even at this stage, he is only thinking of how he could profit.

“.....I understand. I will abide by those conditions then.”

## Chapter 096: Conclusion

And then, after carefully going through the documents we had prepared, he signed it.

“...Received.”

I also checked the documents and accepted it. And then handed it over to Sei. All that's left is for Sei to submit the copy to the trade guild.

“...Alright then, Vuld-sama. Let's call it a night with this. Time is valuable, after all. To me, and to you as well.”

“Oh my, you're being quite hasty now, aren't you? Well... you are a president of a company so I am sure you are busy but from this point onward, I am jobless. Do I have any time worth that much?”

Saying such, he was still laughing.

To which, I wore a puzzled expression and replied,

“Oh? ....But I think you're far more busier than me, though. After all, someone who has lost his job needs to inherit another business.”

“I do not have such business I can inherit, you see.”

“Ah, I see.... Ah, but, are you done packing? Please complete it within a week, alright?”

I said with a sneer.

“I do think there is no need. From the point I signed that document, it has been decided that this company will be closed. Since the company will be closed and you will settle the debts, all the land and buildings belonging to the company will be turned over to me, personally. So I do not see a reason for taking my private possessions.”

He said with a smile, explaining it neatly.

“...What do you mean? I am pretty certain that the document you just signed just said you would be leaving the company... It surely didn't say anything about the company closing.”

In response to his explanation, I ended up replying with a far lower voice than I had thought.

“Whatever it is... The papers I have signed said that I would leave the company but I have not touched the permit at all. I do not plan on handing over the permit to anyone so the company will end up closing, inevitably.”

Hearing those words, I shivered. He probably saw that and his eyes glowed with a sense of superiority.

Ah, I can't help it anymore...

Being unable to hold my laughter, I hurriedly hid my mouth with my fan.

“...Is something funny?”

He came asking without even trying to hide his displeasure.

“Thank you very much for your thorough explanation. However... are you not getting a bit too impertinent?”

“What ever do you mean?”

“What do I mean...? Well, after all, this company isn't really your ‘personal possession’, you know?”

It was quite hard putting together my words all the while trying to hold back my laughter.

“10 years ago... after the president of the company at that time and his wife died from an accident, you took control of the company. Taking advantage of their child not being of age, you hardened your foundation in the company and took power... And then you expelled the son and all the officials who sided with him. Am I wrong?”

To my question, he looked up at me with shock.

“H-how do you....?!”

“How...? It is something one can easily know if they check with the trade guild.”

“However, it means nothing if the person concerned does not register.”

“Fufufu. I said so before, didn't I? I have big ears in this business. I already

pinned down his location and talked it over with him. He said he would inherit the company and updated the permit just a while ago. All that's left is for you to resign and the company will be his."

"Kuugghhh...!"

"Too bad for you. You probably thought that if the company collapsed, all its belongings would be yours."

His face had lost all red and turned white. His whole body was shaking.

"...Don't screw around with me...."

He said like a whisper. However, as he said it with such a low voice, I couldn't understand.

"... Don't you screw around with me!! What, what rights do you have to...."

As he kept getting more and more heated up, his words were starting to become audible again.

And within a while, he started shouting. It could probably be heard outside the room as well. Wondering what was going on, more and more people came looking in on the situation.

However, he probably didn't notice that or his mental state wasn't well enough to be paying it any heed, his wandering gaze fixed onto Sei.

And then he grabbed on to him to snatch the papers.

The one who stopped that was Tanya, who has hiding in the shadows.

She grabbed his hands and locked them behind his back.

"Guuh..!"

"That is as far as you go, Vuld Rankam."

Weaving his way through the crowd, a man entered the place. Seeing him, Vuld's eyes opened wide.

"Why is... Karim here...."

"You let the cat out of the bag, huh, Vuld-san? I am surprised you were able to remember my name even after 10 years. Do I resemble my father that

much?”

In response to the words Vuld said unintentionally, Karim replied like he was enjoying himself.

“.....Ah....”

Overcome with surprise, Vuld was looking at Karim.

“10 years ago, after losing both of my parents at once, you had quite the guts to say ‘leave it all to me’ and drive me out of my own house. Thanks to that, I had to desperately stay alive these past ten years.”

He was smiling but his eyes were definitely not happy. In fact, the atmosphere around him made it feel like he would start resorting to violence anytime now.

“.....Karim.”

As I called out his name to make sure he was in control, he smiled at me, showing that he knew and then closed his eyes for a moment.

“There are a lot of things I would have liked to say but... well, what do you know, now that you are finally in front of me, they don’t really come up, do they?”

Saying that, he opened his eyes again.

“I have already reported that, I, Karim Douma, the son of the previous head, will inherit the company. As I am an adult now, from the moment you signed that document, I am the head of the company.”

Saying that, he looked around.

At all the faces with expressions saying that they didn’t understand anything of what was going on, he raised the trade guilds permit papers.

“And, as the head of the company, I now officially declare that we will be in business partnership with the Azuta conglomerate. I won’t accept any objections.”

Karim declared. It appeared that he was a master of this, and his presence could be felt.

“...I am sorry but could you throw this man out? I wouldn’t bear any harm

coming to my important business partners. Besides, that man has no relation with the company anymore.”

Tanya nodded to his request and dragged Vuld out. As Vuld was still in a daze, he didn't really resist either.

“...Ah, that's right. Vuld-sama.”

As I called his name, Tanya who was dragging him out stopped.

“The aid money to the company is nothing but for the deficit money. The amount of money you had provided in the beginning was for the company... On the papers you had signed just now, it had clearly stated that. Please properly pay your own debts yourself now.”

I said with a smile.

## Chapter 097: The Reflections of a Man

It is those far off days that spring to mind when I close my eyes,  
Those warm days when we all lived together as a family.

Father had managed the company back then, the workers loved him, the business continued to expand, and as a child, I looked up to him. I thought he was majestic.

My mother...she could be frightening when she scolded me, but otherwise, always wore a soft smile and was a truly warm woman.

And while we did have servants, my mother would cook everything, supporting father even behind the scenes. As a child, seeing my father and mother smiling at each other gave me a sense of pride and a sense of warmth.

And then there was my spirited, bright-eyed younger brother. It was the first time I would know someone that was younger than me. And for that reason, I swore in my heart to protect him.

We were that sort of warm family. Those were such gentle days.

The loss of them was truly unexpected.

...They say that a person will understand the true value of something once they have lost it...they were right.

The things that we enjoyed and took for granted, how hard, in fact, were they to come by. How privileged we had been.

With these recollections, I turn remorseful... and wistful.

That is how important those days were to me.

Suddenly, I open my eyes.

What enters my vision is the study.

The room that I am presently in is the president's... in other words, the room that my father had used; had thrown himself into his work.

When I saw it long ago, there was a great deal more books and documents

around, it had appeared to me as an awfully disorderly room.

Now it seemed deserted, and the sight that entered my vision was strangely lonely.

As these thoughts returned to me, I straightened my curved back against the backrest and tightened my hands into fists.

Finally, I've taken it back...

The loss of it all was truly sudden.

On that day...father and mother had taken a carriage to the royal capital on account of some business.

I did not think, nor could I have ever imagined as I saw them off, that they would be involved in an accident and would cease to exist.

I received the news that my father and mother had died. There was no time to grieve, and I had to make preparations for the funeral and handle other matters.

I was still very young at the time, and it was Vuld Rankam, who was the deputy head at the time, who conducted everything in my place.

"It will be fine, just leave everything to me."

I had lost those I depended on, and in my loneliness, I appreciated those words beyond anything.

And so I did everything as he instructed.

"...There's a little trouble at the Conglomerate. Unfortunately, they may bring the investigation to the former head, your father's house as well. Would you mind leaving the house and live in hiding somewhere else for a time?"

And that is why. ...I accepted what he said, so unquestioningly.

And so I left the house and began living in hiding in a rundown house located in a corner district of the royal capital.

"I'll come back for you one day."

He sent us off with those words and a scant sum of money, and there I and my brother lived for some time, in concealment.



One week...two weeks, and then a month.

By the time three months had passed, I could not help but think it strange, and I made my way to the market.

And there I would realize, for the first time, that I had been fooled.

“...I’m sorry, but who are you.”

Those were the words he blandly uttered.

“What are you saying...It is me, it is Karim. I am the son of the former head of this Conglomerate.”

“...The former head’s son, most, unfortunately, passed away along with the former head and his wife.”

“You, what are you saying...!”

“...Somebody!”

I had opened my mouth to say more, but Vuld had called someone.

“This miscreant is claiming to be the former head’s son. Throw him outside.”

Is what he heartlessly said.

“Stop...! Please, don’t do this...!”

Vuld offered a pitying look as I struggled wildly.

And then he approached me as I was dragged away, and brought his lips to my ear.

“...I have dismissed everyone in this Conglomerate that knows you. No matter what you might say, it will be in vain.”

“...Wha...!”

“...You were such a good child. Pure, the sort that no matter what people said, what they did, you did not know to mistrust them. I had even considered placing you at the top, to be controlled...but things have proceeded far better than I could have hoped.”

He said with a grin, and as if saying that he was through with me, signaled with a look to the men that were dragging me. Consequently, they increased

their force and I was briskly thrown out of the Conglomerate building.

As I was still young, I did not know how or who to appeal to.

And that did not change as the days passed. However, in order to live, I needed to secure an income somehow.

Eventually, I was able to sustain us both, but then my brother fell ill, and we needed even more money; by then revenge had become a distant priority.

And so I've continued, drudgingly to this point.

Bearing an anger that could not be unleashed.

And amongst all of that, she appeared. Saying that she needed my name and my help.

"...Pardon me. The head of the Azura Conglomerate is here to see you."

I was brought back to the present at those words, from the employee who had appeared with a knock.

"Let her in."

The person who entered after a brief moment was the woman who had taken me up.

"I'm sure you are very busy, and I do apologize for taking your time like this."

"Not at all. It is for you. There is no question that I'd make time for you."

"Fufufu...you've become very adept with words."

She laughed gently. In the darkness, I had thought that she was beautiful, and that impression did not change in the light.

"I came to sign the contract today. Let's take what's been a verbal agreement up until now and document it clearly in writing."

"Yes. That would be preferable."

The woman to her side handed the contract to me, which I reviewed and signed.

"Indeed. Well, then. I look forward to our partnership, starting tomorrow."

The verbal agreement with her...in the first place, she had said that she

wanted my help.

About wanting to unite my Conglomerate and Azura Conglomerate's transport department, and to carry out shipments under my Conglomerate's name.

"How is the job?"

"There is still so much I need to learn. In truth, the people that you sent from your place have been of great assistance."

The aftermath of expelling everyone who had assisted Vuld was a serious shortage of laborers at the Conglomerate.

And so we had the Azura Conglomerate send us workers.

"Fufufu, I've heard tales from them. That you never leave anything to others, and that you have a rather covetous desire to learn."

"..."

Somehow, I couldn't quite agree or deny it, and I unconsciously shut my mouth.

Seeing it, she laughed once again.

"It is a good thing. Use them, along with me. Never allow others to influence you, hold on to your will and work hard on the task at hand. If you do that, I believe that even through hesitation, you will continue to work without losing yourself. That is my advice to you as your senior."

"...then you also have moments of hesitation?"

"Why, of course. I am human just like you, and I am your senior by only a few years. Many times have I hesitated, felt regret and distress."

It was a little surprising. Knowing her, I had thought that any hardships would be met with a fearless laugh and be overcome, just as when I first met her.

"...But. It was because I had a fixed vision, that there had to be something that I could do, even with such hands as mine."

"...and what was that vision?"

"I met children at the orphanage, and after I had read stories to those

children...I started a business of selling those stories as picture books. And the profits we gained from them were sent to the orphanage as a donation. I think it was after that when I realized. Of course, it is important to earn money, but I understood that the 'profit' needed for the Conglomerate was not that alone, that is my incentive. ...Do you as well, have that sort of ambition or vision?"

I pondered on her words for a moment.

So, the vision that I pursue...

"There is no need to hastily decide if you do not have one now."

She said and smiled, perhaps it was because I had not opened my mouth for a long moment.

"...One day..."

I opened my mouth to utter my thoughts, just as they were.

"Work related to medicine, and also, I want the kind of job that will put smiles on the faces of the people from that town."

"I see..."

But in truth, I do not know at all, how I am going get there. I do not know what I need to do.

Yet even still, if I managed to accomplish that....surely, I could say that everything I experienced up until now was not in vain; I believe that.

Her smile simply deepened as I spoke those words.

## Chapter 098: Too Late

Various matters concerning the Conglomerate have now been settled.

Owing to Karim's Conglomerate now assuming the role of transportation, it is now possible to pass through the borders with the tariffs at standard tax rates.

The reliance on Karim's Conglomerate for transportation meant the realization of reduced costs on exorbitant escort and personnel fees for other Conglomerates as well.

And Karim's Conglomerate would, in turn, gain a profit.

A true win-win relationship for everyone.

In truth, negotiations with the Feudal Lord of the fief, who had imposed the tariff increase, have not been going well.

Interferences from the second Queen have likely had a hand in that.

The tax rate is typically left to each Feudal Lord's discretion, even if I should make a request for the tax rate to be lowered, due to the excommunication being a false charge, the matter would be over as soon as the reply was, "How fortunate for you. However, I am raising the tax rates of all of my fiefs. That is the policy we've set".

I can't help but sense a motive behind the simultaneous raising of tax rates around Armelia fiefs alone.

But making an appeal would only go as far as the second Queen, who was ready and waiting.

There is no doubt that she would just crush it.

Even if father is the Prime Minister, he does not have the authority to command the other Lords.

The King alone has that authority. But the King is confined to his bed from his illness.

Well...even so, it does not change the fact that Feudal Lord's are granted the right to make their own decisions regarding tax rates.

At least during times of peace, a King would seldom exercise his right, and encroach on a Feudal Lord's decisions.

I suppose this is what it means to be blocked from all sides.

...at least I accomplished my purpose, perhaps I'll just return now. Sebastian may be a capable man, but the workload must be reaching a tremendous amount by this time.

Ah...however. If Dean is there, he may be managing it.

I sorted out the documents, thinking on these matters.

"Tanya. I'm considering a return to the fief."

"I think that would be for the best. I shall adjust your schedule at once."

Well...there will be many things to take care of and people to address first, I'm sure I will need to remain a number of days, still.

"Thank you."

Ahh, how I've missed those lands.

This hadn't been like the one to two years absences that I've had during my student years, but it still feels as if I have been away for a very long time.

I supposed it shows just how crowded the past few days have been.

"My lady, a letter from Mimoza has arrived."

I received the envelope from Tanya and broke the seal with a paper knife and viewed its contents.

I feel that my ability to read quickly has greatly improved.

After reading through it once, I close it and return it to the envelope.

"...it seems quite serious."

The contents of the letter was a response to the apology regarding Damme.

It was a reply very typical of Mimoza, that I should not give it much thought, and that she would be very saddened if I stopped inviting her out of consideration.

However, from there on, it somehow started to drift into talk of marriage.

There seem to be... she seems to be having a difficult time in finding an engagement partner.

It is not surprising, Mimoza's family are of the neutral party...that would likely make them very cautious.

But I also sensed in Mimoza, an anxiety over using that as an excuse to continue on this leisurely pace.

For children of the aristocracy, the ties you hold with your spouse's family are very important, and it is important to ascertain what factions they belong to, or which they intend to be affiliated with.

You begin to understand how vitally serious the family status of your partner is.

However, time continues to roll by at a steady pace even as you stop to consider.

...the age of marriage among the nobility is notably younger in comparison to Japan.

But of course, the social background and values, everything is different, so that is something to be expected.

With Iris's memories illuminating my own, I can understand Mimoza's sentiment of impatience to a degree.

But only to 'a degree', and not 'fully'.

I am not even married myself...I no longer hold onto dreams of marriage.

I write a reply to the effect that it would be best for her to calmly wait and not worry too much.

It is so important to make sure of not just the person, but the family... the weight these lines carry when written by me; I smiled in self-mockery.

"...by the way, I wonder how Ryle and Dida are faring."

Ryle and Dida had been taken away by grandfather, yesterday and today respectively.

They are supposed to be my personal guards, but...well, I suppose it is fine, as

I've built up a heap of documents concerning Kyle's Conglomerate, and have no plans to leave the house.

"I am sure those two will be fine, being away for a couple of days. They have spent years training under general Gazelle after all."

"...That is true."

As I was speaking to Tanya, we heard the sound of knocking on the door.

Tanya went to open it and see who it was.

As she continued speaking with the servant, Tanya's expression grew more and more severe.

"...send him away, immediately."

"But..."

The servant winced at the ice in her voice and the force of the words but stood his ground.

"Very well. I will go then."

She said as if there was no point in speaking further.

But the servant's expression changed to that of relief at Tanya's reply.

Perhaps an indication that the visitor was...of a certain level of importance.

"...Tanya."

"Excuse me. I will go out and deal with this."

Looking at Tanya, I understood that she did not want me to know... Whatever the matter was, she meant to handle it in private.

"Wait a moment. Tanya, who has come to visit?"

"My lady, you have no need to concern yourself with this. I will take care of everything."

"...Tanya."

As I called her name once again, she looked at me, a troubled expression on her face.



“It is Van Lutasha that’s come to see you, my lady.”

“...Van...”

In spite of myself, I felt an uneasiness from hearing his name.

“It would be better if you did not recklessly contact him, so long as Ryle and Dida are not with you. We cannot predict what he is thinking, what he might do. ...Besides, his visiting without any prior announcement is beyond insulting.”

She is right. In any case, there is nothing at all I wish to discuss with him.

Why must I to listen to what he has to say when he did not do the same for me, when I once needed him.

“...You are right. Thank you, Tanya. Send him away.”

“Certainly.”

## Chapter 099: Why

Van had come... what possible reason could he have had, coming to see me at this time... I could not help but ponder on this.

It could have only been related to the excommunication upheaval.

Apparently, Van's father had been relieved of his position as Pope and condemned to imprisonment.

I feel that he would be better served by relying on those he's befriended up until now, instead of coming to me for help...

Yuri Noir, the Baron's daughter...she has gained somewhat of a political voice since becoming Edward's betrothed.

Ed is the second son, and his maternal grandfather, Marquis Maeria was now at the height of his power.

Ah...but, Berne is immersed in the daily work he's undertaken under father, and it would be difficult to see him; Dorsen as well, appears to be very busy ever since he joined the Knights.

But then, I too have plenty of appointments to fulfill.

Ahhh, I just want to finish this and go back to the feudal land. Surely, he wouldn't impose on me once there.

What does he intend to say to me, face to face... the mere thought of it reeks of trouble.

"I have returned, my lady."

As I was contemplating on such matters, Tanya had returned.

"You were quite quick then...?"

"Yes. I hurriedly sent him on his way."

Her expression was one of composure, but there was insolence in her voice.

Tanya appeared to be quite irritated by it all. I will have to do something for her later.

“Did he say anything?”

First things first, I must learn what I can.

“Nothing. He said nothing... for I ran that man off before he could even open his mouth.”

Tanya was smiling, but her eyes were serious. If anything, she exuded such an intensely chilling air, that it sent shivers through my body.

I wanted to ask her how she got him to leave, but was now too afraid to.

...at least, Tanya wouldn't do anything too strange, so I suppose it is alright. I want to believe it is alright.

“It's fine then. There is really no point in stressing over him now. Tanya, please put away those papers over there.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Tanya replied, a bright smile on her face.

“...incidentally, my lady.”

“What is it, Tanya?”

“Vuld has, we've lost sight of him.”

“Oh...”

As a precaution, his movements had been under surveillance since he had been driven out of Karim's Conglomerate.

We did not want our work to be hindered out of spite as it was that time with Damme.

“...Do we have reason to believe he will attempt anything towards us?”

“He had made no contact with Marquis Rudolf...and the other nobles would not take him seriously. In the first place, he does not even have the sufficient funds left to attempt something. He must have gone into hiding in order to escape his debts...I believe that is the most likely explanation.”

“I see... I hope that is so. From now on, I want the resources spent on Vuld to be used to survey the actions of nobles that belong to the second prince' party

instead.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes, I am certain. Each store has its own guards now, and I have Ryle and Dida close by to protect me. You must not worry about me. ...I think it would be much more advantageous to look into this matter of the party of the second prince.”

“Certainly. I will do as you say.”

Tanya; she’s become quite the intelligence operative. I’ve been hiring men with that very occupation of late, and Tanya has been the one the one holding them all together.

In truth, the Armelia Duke...that is to say, father, already has such people under his employment at present.

But ever since the scandal regarding the excommunication, I have deeply felt the importance of information, and have little by little, started to gather people who could serve me personally.

Well, it is indeed difficult to find such people that you can truly trust, and so they are currently few in numbers...For this, I must rely on the connections of my father, mother, and grandfather.

“...Let us quickly finish the work here and go home.”

“Yes, my lady.”

## Chapter 100: Dida's dissatisfaction

"So, master, why do we have to go as well?"

Oddly enough, Ryle didn't seem to have an issue with my attitude.

After all, I was always taken care of by my master, there wasn't anything demanding that the mistress had to attend to, and Tanya was also by her side. So there should be no issue!

"Haha, don't say that. I also want to leave this noisy capital as soon as possible, and go back to our land to enjoy some relaxation!"

Master was a currently serving general.

But that was also a role that had the significance of being a hero in reputation and duties.

Originally, Master was supposed to have retired years ago according to his age...it's just that no one has emerged who is stronger than him.

As his age increased, Master's strength has suffered, but at the same time his technique has been improved through practice.

Even now in his weakened state, he could still match Ryle. It seemed like we couldn't treat him as an ordinary old man.

After all, there were no more than five people among the military section and knights that could actually stand up to a match against Ryle.

So you could say that Master's strength had decreased, but you couldn't say that his overall power had been lost.

Anyways, that was besides the point.

At the moment, Master's job consisted of barely any actual duties. After all, there hadn't been any large-scale wars within recent years.

Right now, his job was only to coordinate the relationship between military and knights, and to train potential replacements.

So even though he had the title of general, he should actually be quite free in

terms of action.

Normally he was in his own territory. A while back he also hung out around Duke Armenia's territory as well. Although he occasionally went to the border to observe the happenings, that was mostly just to satisfy his urges to walk around.

Generally speaking, he shouldn't be around the palace that much.

He himself had said he hated all the complicated rules and regulations.

But recently Master was always hanging around the capital, and was often moving in and out of the palace.

The only reason I could think of was the proposal submitted to "disband the army".

"Master, are there any movements from above?"

"Um, there's no equipment right now. But if we're not here, I don't know what will happen."

He responds with a bitter expression.

His existence is something that the various lords and officials could not overlook.

After all, he had the track record of a hero, and was extremely popular even among the common people.

As long as Master remained, he could exert pressure on all sides.

That was why he frequented the palace so often recently, to see if there was any strange turn of events that might be occurring soon.

"I don't start wars because I like fighting, but I'm also not an idiot about these things. Without the protection of the military, who will defend the country? Yet Edward-sama seems not to notice this at all...the opportunistic nobles who were agreeing with the proposal at the meeting think that even if the country ceases to exist, they can avoid the turmoil by staying hidden in their own land. Even so, they overlook the danger of turmoil."

"The mistress has already taken the possibility of battle into consideration,

Master.”

“Is that so?”

Because of what I said, Master let out a sad chuckle.

“I’m an old bag of bones that can at least function as a bit of pressure when needed. If I turned that child’s resolution into a bunch of empty worries, then I really must work harder.”

“Is that so, if it’s for the mistress then there’s no other choice.”

“What are you saying? Your social network isn’t broad enough to become a force for exerting political pressure. You’re just here because I can let my anger out in your presence.”

“Um...Master, I’ve suddenly lost all motivation.”

“Hey, Dida. As long as we can be useful to the mistress in the end, we should do all that we can. Of course, protecting her is the most important part of our job.”

There was nothing more to do. If that was the case, I could only accompany Ryle and keep going on with Master.

# Chapter 101: Dawson's Request

"What's wrong, what's wrong! You aren't mustering up enough strength for the sword!"

*Squeak, squeak!* The swords ground against each other, making the grating sound of metal on metal.

The good-hearted Ryle was currently instructing the knights on technique in the form of combat.

On the other side, I was dealing with the people from the military.

...how did things come to this!

Yesterday I did carry out a simulated battle against Master...well, more like a depressurizing session for him!

I don't know why, but the people from the military and the knights were watching us from the distance as we fought.

Unlike when we previously attended the capital's simulated battles, this time their eyes carried a slight hint of respect and fear.

Well. At the time I thought that being watched was no big deal, so I just ignored it. But today someone ran over and asked me directly whether I'd be willing to compare our skills in a battle.

Master said that it was good to at least humor them, so I accepted with the thought that it would at least be a good way to waste some time.

...but now it's clear that this isn't a simulated battle at all. We're just helping them train.

I don't know when Ryle started getting invested, but it felt like he wasn't really fighting a worthy opponent, but more just training the Armenia troops!

For such a rare opportunity, he could have picked way better opponents...I occasionally also wanted to really have a serious joust with people aside from Ryle and Master!

Suddenly, I felt someone's eyes on me.



Just in time for me to knock the sword out of my opponent's hand. Let me confirm who was watching me.

Hmm, that person was the son of the knight order's leader. His name seemed to be Daw...son? Whatever, names didn't matter. But that asshole was definitely one of the people who treated my lady disrespectfully!

Why, why is he staring down me and Ryle right now, with a look on his face like he wants to say something?

Even as these questions popped up in my mind, that bastard's existence itself was making me angry. Best to just pretend I didn't realize it was him and focus on fighting.

"...could you instruct me in a simulated match?"

Just as I concluded my previous match, Dawson ran over to ask me.

His actions seemed to sink the knight order into a strange panic. Seems like they were worried about how I would respond to him!

"Hm, all right."

I responded casually, planning on extinguishing the concerns of the men. But hearing his response, I could no longer stay calm.

"...If I win, please let me meet the daughter of Duke Armenia."

What was this guy saying?

"...What did you just say?"

"Exactly what I meant...I just hope that you might allow me to see her once."

"I'm just a guard. How could I bring something like that up to my lady?"

"I've already sent a request to meet to the Duke's family, but I was rejected... everyone on the outside knows that she trusts you deeply. If you intervened, you could potentially arrange a meeting."

"...trust and such isn't a relevant issue here. Why is it that we, who respond to our lady, have any responsibility to do this kind of work for people like you!"

"...That's why I said, if I win..."

“...Interesting.”

Heh heh. My heart was already filled with anger!

What did he want from my lady?

Did he want to harass her again, or try to get close to her...or is it that only now he remembers to apologize for what he did beforehand!

No matter which it is, now that we're at this point, how could I allow any of them!

“Ryle won't do, but you think that you can defeat me, is that it? Huh. Get started! If I win, you're not allowed to so much as approach the lady!”

The judge seemed confused, but still sent out the signal for the match to begin.

So, how was I going to teach this bastard a lesson now.

Right now my heart was filled with anger for him. Ah, even my body felt restless. How long had it been since I got so angry?

Licking my lips, I focused my thoughts on how to best beat this asshole before me down. Ah, probably in a way that the military and knight order wouldn't stop me.

...but, it seemed like I was thinking too hard. My body moved reflexively!

In a single moment.

A single moment reflex, and I knocked my opponent's sword out of his hand.

Che. I was planning on toying with him a little longer before pushing him to the edge. Whatever.

Last time Ryle had gone too soft. This time it was my turn to really beat him up!

Thinking this, I didn't stop and didn't soften my blow as it descended upon my opponent. But—

“...What the hell is this, Ryle!”

“Calm down, Dida.”

For some reason, Ryle had stopped my sword.

“I’m very calm, so don’t stop me. If you understand, get out of the way.”

“You don’t understand at all.”

Damn, now I was riled up! This guy who always kept our lady at the top of his priorities was now standing up for this guy who had hurt her. I thought he was a reliable warrior, but what was he thinking now?

“If you keep protecting that guy, I won’t spare even you.”

“...All right. Then come at me.”

As we spoke, I poured more force into the sword in my hand. But even so, Ryle didn’t back down. Instead he responded by increasing the force of his hand as well.

“...Open your eyes and look closely, Dida,” Ryle said as he blocked my sword.

“Huh, what am I supposed to be looking at?”

As I said this, I couldn’t speak anymore, because I saw Dawson, who was sitting behind Ryle on the ground.

That moment, my sword arm dropped.

“...Why did you stop?”

The question came from none other than Dawson himself.

“I should be the one asking here. Why do I have to help you make your wish come true!”

“...that...”

“Take a look at yourself, how pathetic you look. Che, what a disappointment.”

“W-wait a minute...”

Dawson shouted at us, seeing that we were about to leave the battlegrounds.

But I didn’t plan to listen to him, so I didn’t turn around.

“If even you won’t punish me, who should I ask to punish me?!”

What the hell was he saying? I couldn’t help myself and walked back to him.

And then, I pulled out my sword and stabbed downwards. Even though it hadn't been edged yet, it plummeted straight into the ground.

"Stop playing around here."

I announced this curtly, staring Dawson down.

"Who you should ask for punishment? Who the hell knows...the cause-and-effects between us are no longer straightforward enough to count out."

Being able to apologize and have all mistakes forgiven...how could something that ideal happen!

Experience regret with full sincerity, taste that bitterness thoroughly.

Blame yourself deeply, imprint that punishment into your heart.

And then really experience it. Our anger, our lady's sadness.

After saying this, I left the battlegrounds for good, without looking back.

Ryle didn't seem to have any issue with what I had done, and left alongside me.

And then, we began our own training anew.

## Chapter 102: A Sister's Ambush

The day before we left the capital, I took Tanya with me to walk around on the streets.

As a matter of fact, we had no gaps in our schedule. But since we could only come around the capital so often, we still wanted to make time for a shopping trip.

Plus, I want to bring home some souvenirs for everyone who was still hanging around back home.

“What does everyone like?”

For Rehme and Moneda, I prepared the capital's specialty sweets. The two of them were performing cerebral work, after all, so sugar was essential.

But for Sei and Merida, sweets would only make them think of work. So what should I choose then?

“Any gift picked by you will make everyone happy!”

I could only smile awkwardly in response to Tanya's answer.

“That makes it the most troublesome. I rarely get the chance to give other people gifts, so I need to pick something useful to others...if it's something they wanted already, that would be even better.”

As usual, I changed before leaving. Even though we'd already went through a few shops and picked a few backup gifts, I didn't think most of what we were seeing were good gifts...

Just as I was worrying and strolling along the street.

Ah...that person's silhouette looks familiar!

“...Dean.”

I didn't expect it to be Dean. What's more, there was a woman I didn't know next to him.

Why was Dean here...and who was the woman by his side?

Questions like these took over my thoughts. I didn't know why, but my chest felt suffocated.

Ah...no, no. Why he was here, who the woman was—none of these were things I could interfere in.

Right now he wasn't in a contract with me. It was his freedom to be with who he wanted to.

Waving aside my doubts, I kept trying to convince myself. But somehow the uncomfortable feeling in my chest remained.

Just then, Dean noticed me as well. In that moment, his eyes went wide with surprise.

Seeing his reaction, my heart felt even heavier.

...maybe we should just go home soon. But turning around right here was so unnatural. Plus we hadn't finished shopping for everyone!

"Milady, it's been a while."

"Dean, it has been a while. I didn't expect to encounter you in the capital. Who is your companion?"

"Nice to meet you. My name is Letty. I've been meaning to thank you and those around you for looking after my older brother."

"...brother?"

Upon closer inspection, she did look a lot like Dean.

If you really had to name a difference, Dean's eyes were deep green like jade, while Letty's were bright like an expensive olivine stone!

"Yes. My family is rather overprotective of me, and they don't allow me to leave home myself. Every time you helped Big Brother, I would be at home managing things on his behalf. I apologize for not being able to visit until now."

Oh. In that case, I've probably become indebted to her indirectly.

Now then, I should also take the opportunity to express my gratefulness!

"You're too polite. If it's convenient for you, let's go somewhere else to talk. I also want to hear how my brother works under you, milady," Letty said with a

smile as radiant as a flower.

“Milady, please don’t pay any heed to my sister’s requests. You’re such a busy person, no need to take time out to accompany my sister...”

“Hm, is there something that Brother doesn’t want me to hear?”

“Letty...you...”

Strangely enough, Dean seemed quite frazzled when standing next to Letty. It was the first time I’d seen him like this.

“Hehe,” I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“I agree. It’s not convenient to talk at length here. Let’s find a place to sit down and talk.”

Just like that, we entered a restaurant. It was a restaurant that had a good relationships with the Armenia family, so they just gave us our own room.

If it were in a random cafe by the side of the road, I wouldn’t be able to introduce myself properly. That would render my disguise pointless.

“Hello, let me formally introduce myself. It’s a pleasure to meet you, my name is Iris Lana Armenia.”

“Nice to meet you. My name is Letty. Thank for you looking after my brother for so long.”

“That should be my line. For the longest time Dean has helped us out. Because of him coming over to help, you must have suffered through a lot of trouble. I’m truly sorry...”

“That’s an exaggeration...I like my work anyways. I also have a lot of respect for you, milady, so don’t talk of trouble!”

“Ah...”

Why does it feel like Letty’s eyes are constantly sparkling!

Plus, we were only meeting for the first time. Suddenly bringing up respect like that—I didn’t know what she was talking about!

“Within a few years of your reign over Duke Armenia’s territory, you’ve managed to expand your land’s economic development immensely. What’s

more, many have even moved over because of its liveability. You're a woman, yet you are active at the front line of politics and economics. As a woman, I feel happy and proud to hear your accomplishments!"

It's like she saw through my thoughts and provided me with an explanation!

Even though she's an adorable child, she really is Dean's sister!

"Thank you...you also seem to work for Dean. What kind of help do you provide him?"

"I generally organize information that has been collected, and engage in relevant communications based on the information...but most of the communication parts really goes to my brother. I provide background support and occasionally help out."

"Background work? Organizing information and preparing for negotiations are all jobs that need patience. Although I'm a substitute leader, that's also my main job. I think it's not so different from what you do."

"You shouldn't say that...in your situation, milady, you have to make decisions that you're responsible for after reviewing all of the information. So it's completely different from my job. But hearing you say this, I'm happy as well." From that point on, I enjoyed talking with Letty...at least I think I do...

"Uh...does Miss Iris often experience this as well?"

"Yes, quite a bit. After hours of sifting through documents, I'll have a headache at the end of it."

"Exactly...especially at night. It's very difficult to get up in the morning!"

Somehow, our conversation turned into concerns about health and how to relieve stress.

It didn't seem like something that we in our teens should be talking about.

We should be talking about something like our romantic troubles, or which dessert place was the best. Something that was more suited to girls our age.

But it did seem like Letty had been working hard the whole time. Her concerns in this area were completely relatable to us. Without realizing it, we had become obsessed with the topic.



Right now Dean had been abandoned on the side. It was just me and Letty talking.

Suddenly, Letty's smiling face fell. Her attitude turned serious as she suddenly changed the topic.

"Lady Iris, as someone in a supporting role, I have something to ask you... you're obviously shouldering a workload that's two or three times what most people have. Just like my brother has me, shouldn't you also find someone to share your burden?"

"My current workload has already lessened quite a bit...there are some reliable people in the merchants' guild, and my work in the territory has the servants at home and your brother to help me."

"Ah...has Brother managed to help you?"

"Of course. Your brother is very detail-oriented, and can always attend to the split ends and other details very well...and he hasn't made a mistake in his work yet. If Dean wasn't here, I don't know where I would be now."

Yep. Dean was my important right hand man!

Although I couldn't really explain it clearly...but, if it were Sei, Tanya, Rehme, or Sebastian, no matter how perfectly they could complete my orders, they still wouldn't understand the point of my words.

After all, they weren't able to stand in my shoes, so I couldn't ask them to be observant on every issue.

But Dean somehow wasn't tied by that. He was always able to give me suitable opinions.

Whether it was something I came up with on a whim or after deep thought, Dean could always give me suitable suggestions on how to realize them most effectively.

In the end, it was always a better result than I could come up with alone, even after thinking long and hard.

Dean really was my right hand man...or perhaps someone like my partner.

"Hm, is that so...Brother really is quite attentive to details. And because of

that, my work becomes much easier than it might be.”

Letty’s answer made me smile.

“Heh, that’s true.”

“Letty, I feel like this isn’t something we should discuss in front of others.”

Dean piped up for the first time.

“Uh, Brother, I don’t know when I’ll be able to meet Lady Iris next. So I’m saying all I want to say now.”

“...Speaking of that, Letty, you don’t seem to leave home much.”

“Yes, my family is too protective of me. But Brother keeps running around for work. If I’m gone from home as well, then a lot of work won’t be able to proceed and everyone else will suffer a lot of trouble on my behalf.”

“Hm. Then Letty, are you usually in the capital?”

“Yes.”

“I think I’ll be coming here again. Then we’ll see each other then!”

## Chapter 103: An Uninvited “Guest”

“Next time be sure to visit our territory.”

“Oh, yes. After I finish all my current jobs, I’ll be sure to go.”

“Then we’ll see each other next time.”

After that, I continued my quest for a suitable gift.

Tomorrow we’ll be returning to our land, so I hope I can get something today.

In the end, I bought a handkerchief for Sei and Merida at an accessories store recommended by Letty, and got sweets for everyone else just as we had planned originally.

While we were taking the carriage back, I was immersed in immense satisfaction. But when we arrived at the gates, that person showed up.

“Miss Iris!”

Saying this, that person approached.

Ryle and Dida immediately stood in front of me, protecting me from the person in question.

“Ah, I wished to see you...Miss Iris, would you be able to reward me with your attention for a few words?”

This was a person I was familiar with.

“Sir Van...why are you here...”

The moment I said the name, Ryle and Dida’s sense of danger seemed to heighten.

And Tanya had also chased him away previously when he showed up unannounced, so her expression was less than pleased as well.

“As to why...I wanted to meet with you beforehand. When I was told you weren’t home, I went away. So today I took the time to stay here and wait for you.”

“Even so, you’re being very rude right now. No appointment, coming straight

to the door...you're completely disrespecting the Duke Armenia's family!"

Tanya responded aggressively to Van's excuses.

Although Ryle and Dida didn't come to shouting, they seemed to hold the same opinions and looked quite unhappy with the situation.

"...Forget it, Sir Van. It's not convenient to talk here. Let's talk inside."

"Miss Iris?"

"I don't want to cause even more mayhem at the door. Sir Van, I'll hear you through. Come on in."

Although it was said in quite a rude tone, I wasn't so gentle as to treat an uninvited "guest" like this with courtesy.

Taking a deep breath, I walked into the door.

"What a heavy-hearted reception."

That was what Van said the moment he sat down.

Everyone here viewed him with caution and hostility, after all...of course, Duke Armenia's servants were not so out of control that they would show all this on the surface.

Even in this guest room, Ryle and Dida and Tanya stood by me, as if guarding me.

"Did you think you would be welcomed here?"

"No. I misspoke."

"So, what are you here for? I'm returning to my land tomorrow, so please make this explanation short."

"...I have a favor to ask of you."

"What is it?"

Although I had asked him to keep it simple, he hadn't even mentioned the word "negotiation" before going straight to the topic. His uncharacteristic impatience surprised me.

Before that, he had come directly to visit me and ask a favor without so much

as an appointment. The three beside me right now were simmering with fury, almost ready to pounce within a moment's notice.

"I want you to be my sponsor."

"Ah..."

Although I had seen it coming, I never expected him to say it outright...I couldn't believe that he was shameless enough to do so!

"I caused you a lot of distress this time, so this might seem rather thick-skinned of me...right now, I'm in a difficult situation. And the Church of Darryl is also a mess internally...if we continue on like this, the situation in the Church might seep out and affect the whole kingdom itself. So as a son of the head of state who caused this turmoil, if I construct a cooperative relationship with you, the victim of this event, and show that to everyone...I think there's no better way to suppress the turmoil than that."

What he said was true. After the previous mess where the pope and his followers were cleared out and held responsible for their actions, the Church itself was a huge mess at the moment.

At the same time, I had also heard that they were investigating nobles who had secretly formed alliances with the pope...but those nobles were only abandoned pawns, small characters not even worth mentioning. Whoever was behind the scenes and responsible for all this couldn't be traced at all.

"...It's true that the Church of Darryl's current chaos is harmful to the kingdom."

"Then..."

Van's eyes, fixed on me, gleamed with the excitement of expectation.

But, I was really sorry for this.

"...But, if I help you, how will I stand to benefit?"

I flipped the question on him with a cold tone.

## Chapter 104: Negotiations | Part 1

“Benefits?”

Van’s expression seemed puzzled.

“Yes, benefits. If I cooperate with you, what benefits do I get?”

“Before mentioning benefits, don’t you have any ideals of saving the kingdom when it’s in danger as a noble of the kingdom?”

“Well...you’re saying strange things now. Originally, if you weren’t scheming how to frame me for various crimes, how would you even end up here?”

I started to giggle. Really, I was laughing from the bottom of my heart.

“Also, originally, the chaos didn’t just start today. With their eye on the succession to the throne, nobles split into two parties...no, if you count the neutral ones, perhaps three. With this situation going on for as long as it has, it’s a miracle that this country is still intact.”

Although I don’t know how they managed it, I was thankful to the officials who were responsible for allowing this country to continue functioning.

If the faction wars were more intense than they currently are, it wasn’t difficult to imagine that the lives of people would be even more terrible.

If neighboring countries took advantage of this opportunity to attack us, it wouldn’t be anything unexpected.

And those who prevented the worst possible situation from happening deserved admiration for their methods.

Although it’s ridiculous to compare a country to a territory, if I were to use managing a territory as a metaphor, the leader would be me alone.

It’s exactly because I had no opposition that I could enforce many new policies with an iron fist; being in a ruler class with only oneself is not difficult.

On the other hand, if I were to run this country, anything I wanted to do would be opposed by enemy forces, while my own side might even lean towards the other side occasionally, until I might suspect that they weren’t

even fully faithful to me.

Not only that, but you had to ensure your opponents around you didn't try anything.

Under the current environment, aside from work there were plenty other things to fritter away at one's energy levels.

And then, of course, the actual work itself was running the risk of "any misstep would turn into a crisis that would threaten the country itself"—a tightrope situation.

Ah, I should prepare some stomach medicine for my father...as I thought this, I gazed at Van.

"And you, who were one of the main causes of the country's current state, are now able to talk about preventing that chaos and joining hands with me? Which one of your mouths is fibbing this time, hm?"

"I never did anything to endanger this country."

"Hm, what a lack of self-awareness. Are you close with Sir Edward, by any chance?"

I giggled again. Was the laughter angering him? Van frowned.

"We are. We're from the same academy, so that's a given."

"That's not a given. That's why I asked...that school is a microcosmic version of this country's nobles and their society. You come together because your parents are in the same faction. Although I don't know if you were chasing after Sir Edward or Yuri...but if you were together like that all the time, anyone would come to the same conclusion—'Sir Van, and the pope backing up Sir Van, are in support of Sir Edward.'"

In that case, me and Bern were really in danger.

Originally, because I was Sir Edward's fiancée, Bern should have maintained his distance from him...what we didn't expect was that Bern approached Edward or Yuri on his own.

Even if I've been marked by the shame of "having abandoned an arranged marriage" in the noble society, I understand even better my father's wish for

me to distance myself from them.

“You’re a part of what has increased the internal conflicts of this country. And even now you can still say you’re doing it for the country? Don’t make me laugh.”



## Chapter 105: Negotiations | Part 2

Van bit his lip hard.

“...So, I don’t plan to continue negotiating with you. Please forgive me for departing now.”

“...Please wait!”

He approached me as I stood up.

But Tanya, Ryle, and Dida stood between me and him.

“Do you have any more business with me?”

“I, I...!”

I observed Van coolly as he shouted.

“What should I do! Help me please!”

Help me please...hm. Hearing his words, I couldn’t help but start laughing scornfully.

“Why oh why must I help you?”

“That...”

“I’m the ‘evil woman’ who was picking on the ‘gentle’ Yuri, right? Didn’t you already admonish me alongside Sir Edward? You want a person like that to help you without offering me anything in return?”

My voice was so cold that I scared even myself.

Hearing his pleas for help, my mind remained blank, thoughtless.

Of course I had no sympathy for him. And my position was no longer the warped sense of satisfaction I had felt in the past.

All that there was was...nothing. It really felt like nothing. I no longer cared what happened to him anymore

“My father was rejected from the position of the pope. But I thought that Yuri would continue to be by my side, just like before...!”

“But he suddenly became a stranger. As if we’d never known each other.”

All in all, all Yuri wanted was the power of the church backing him up.

“Everyone else too, they were completely different. So cold. I...”

“So what?”

I answered coldly.

“Treated like a stranger by those you love? Everyone became cold, uncaring? Even if that’s your situation, I don’t really care. You must not have cared either when you chased me out of the academy, hm?”

Hearing me mock him, his face contorted.

“...Ah, it’s true. Yes, I stood on the side that pushed you out. And after doing that I still came here. Even I feel that I’m being an idiot.”

“Oh? It’s good that you understand that. If that’s the case, then please leave as soon as possible.”

“But even so, I can’t give up. I want to show the people who left me behind that they’re wrong. I don’t want to just give up without doing anything!”

“Ha...”

Hearing him snarl, I laughed. Was it mockery of him? Not completely so.

Unbelievable. Such a laidback, easy-going fellow, becoming like this because of how badly he wants change.

His face still twisted, he shouted, even though he knew that it was hopeless, so disheveled I could hardly connect him in my mind with the man I had known at the academy.

“Ah, yes. Honestly, I don’t care about the country. I just want the people who’ve abandoned me to come back. That’s why I’m here...!”

“So what if they come back? You beg for her love? Beg that you can continue to stand by her side?”

“...They abandoned me. They don’t matter anymore. I just, I’m just doing this for myself...!”

...What a selfish, selfish way to think.

But I wasn't surprised. I understood the feeling as well. Even now, deep down, I wanted them to come back to me.

But at the same time...what a dangerous way to think.

The definitive difference between him and me was that I didn't treat it as my ultimate goal. If I were trapped in that kind of mindset, I wouldn't be able to face all my followers with a clear conscience.

But Van right now...he was treating it as his only motivation, his only goal.

A sharp aura surrounded him because of how badly he wanted it. No matter what happened, he would not give up.

Once again, I sat down opposite him.

"So you want to join forces."

He nodded.

So it was...I also still held onto the wish that they might come back for me. That's how I got so far.

...what a pity.

"Even with my support, you'll never become the pope at this rate. The organization is undergoing a complete transformation."

I still maintained contact with Priest Ralph. His reports were clear enough: Van would never be pope.

Most of the people in the upper society of the Church had been arrested without hesitation. The proposal to do away with pope as a hereditary position was also pretty much been passed with few objections.

As a replacement, in the future they planned to have cardinals vote on who would become the pope.

"In my position, compared to supporting you, I'd much rather support Priest Ralph, who has shown his capabilities in dealing with the current situation. Now that the Church isn't your realm, no matter in terms of experience or other abilities, you'd never be able to compare to Priest Ralph. If you continue down

this path, it's hard to say if you'll even be able to stay within the religion itself."

Van, after all, was currently in an awkward position. Without all that had happened this time, he would have entered the Church to accumulate experience to prepare for his future role...but now, he didn't have that route available to him.

To the Church of Daryl that was currently trying to get rid of the old system, his existence was a pure impediment to progress.

It was unclear whether or not he'd even be able to keep his right to remain a member of the Church.

"...but to set you up in another church might still be possible. Of course, as an anticlerical."

I knew the person who was the priest and head of the church there on a personal level.

If it was him, perhaps I could ask a favor.

"A completely average anticlerical. You might not even be able to enter the actual church, let alone be a pope. But the person in question is more likely to trust what he sees in you rather than what others say. If you accumulate and display your personal abilities, maybe he would be willing to give you more responsibilities."

...So. What would he do?

In regards to this question, I couldn't see any confusion or hesitation in him.

## Chapter 106: Negotiations | Part 3

After we exchanged a contract, he left.

“...why were you so kind to him?”

Ryle said with some dissatisfaction.

I was a bit surprised that it wasn't Tanya asking. But a glance in her direction told me that she was thinking the same thing.

“Kind, huh?”

I couldn't help but laugh out loud.

Seeing my reaction, both of them looked surprised.

“Immediately prepare to reach out to Priest Ralph.”

“Yes, milady,” Tanya responded.

“...I also told Van. Right now, the Church of Daryl is in the midst of revolution. But not everyone agrees with the movement. That's to be expected.”

It wasn't just the higher level church officials who had benefited from all that was going on, but also the nobles who were closely connected with the church.

Those people, the nobles and the officials alike...wouldn't want to watch this revolution from the sidelines without doing anything.

They would undoubtedly engage in some kind of obstruction.

Van's bloodline put him in quite a bit of danger.

That's why I wanted to pull him to my side...before the other side got him first.

“...Right now his regret and dissatisfaction with the situation has been transformed into motivation with some help from me. If we give this information to Priest Ralph, he'll be able to use it to the best of his abilities. What I told Van wasn't a lie. At the moment, it's a good plan to set him up in the capital to study medicine and service the people. This will undoubtedly be what Priest Ralph is planning for, and will potentially open up a path into the

main church. What's more, we'll be able to cash in on the favor he owes us now."

It was a step taken with full faith in Priest Ralph's abilities.

"On the other hand, even if he forgets his current dissatisfaction, that's no loss to us. I'll still be able to access his movements, and eliminate all potential contact with people on the other side. If we succeed, perhaps we'll be able to cash in on a favor in the future on Priest Ralph's side."

"I see. Then I'll have my subordinates keep an eye on him."

"That's exactly what I was going to ask you to do...no matter how the situation ends up, it will prove beneficial to me. Isn't that right? Then, how is this kindness?"

When he came to me with his plea, I realized that no matter how things developed they would be beneficial to me.

That's why I couldn't stop laughing.

Well, it was a good situation...after all, I was the rich villianness. And Van had delivered himself to me.

## Chapter 107: Tanya's concern

"Phew..."

Combing through the hair I'd let down, I sighed.

It was almost at the time when the calendar was about to flip over, signifying the end of a day.

After I finished preparing all the small things milady needed to finish before going to sleep, I was also about to go to bed.

Although a lot of people ask, "Do you really ever sleep?" in a half-joking way, I'm human too. Of course, sleep is necessary.

Plus, this seemed like a more suitable question for Mr. Sebastian rather than me. He looked as if he would never tire, always with a gentle expression on his face. How admirable.

I needed to treat him as my role model, and continuously improve myself to that end.

As I mulled over one thing after another, I suddenly picked up the ribbon on the table. The one that was in a set with Merida, milady, and Rehme.

...When was it? I recall it was back when I was still practicing as a servant girl.

When milady's father invited a merchant friend over, and milady was asked if there was anything she wanted, she picked out these hair ribbons.

"That's all? What about these gemstones?"

Seeing milady pick the ribbon among a collection of luxurious and expensive items, her father seemed somewhat incredulous...her mother also tried to convince her to pick something else.

"Yes, this is enough. May I please have four of them?"

And then, milady brought the ribbons to us three.

"Everyone is the same."

Saying this, she smiled.

Although it was quite a high-price artifact for us...but for milady, who was the daughter of a duke's family, it should have been something cheap.

But to her, they were treasures.

"If you don't like them, I'm sorry. But I was thinking that it would be great if we could get them all in a set. If you'd be willing to take them I would be very happy."

I felt that that day, I was so happy. Happy that I was picked up in that place, on that day, by milady.

If she hadn't, I probably would have died somewhere.

I don't remember when I started living there. But I was probably abandoned by my parents.

What I do remember is that I was there, alone—in the slums of the capital.

Young and clueless as I was, I went hungry every day and gradually began to deteriorate.

Every day, I sat in the alleyway, and stared up at the sky.

Occasionally, I'd see children hand in hand with their parents. I didn't know why, but it made me cry.

So this was my fate, to die alone...yes, before long, even I lost the will to live. In fact, I wanted to disappear as quickly as possible.

And then one day, two men that I didn't know started speaking to me.

What they said was unclear. I don't remember anymore.

But their dirty smiles made me understand instinctively that these were not good people.

Although I had already given up hope for survival, my body still reacted to the danger out of instinct. I wanted to escape, so I started to run.

Running, running...but a child without stamina couldn't hope to run away from these men. I was about to be caught.

Milady was the one who stepped in back then and saved me.



I had been running with all my strength. Fortunately for me, the route that I was taking was in the direction of the main street—I charged in front of her carriage.

“Are you hurt?”

The first time I saw her, I remember thinking—why is it that the world she and I exist in is so different? I shook my head.

“That’s good...hey, do you have anywhere to go?”

In response to that question, I shook my head again.

“Is that so...then, do you want to come with us?”

After that, although her servants tried to stop her, she still brought me along...and so I was saved.

“I kept feeling that she was being pursued by someone. I’ll tell my father about the people who were after her.”

Later I found out that those men were out to catch orphaned children and sell them at market for cheap prices.

Because they saw me being picked up by milady and her servants, they decided to give up on me.

And then, according to her suggestions and the reports of the servants, they were all arrested.

“From today onwards, let’s live here together. Your name is?”

“...I don’t know.”

“Is that so. Then, how about Tanya? It’s a name that has appeared in a fairytale, the name of a smart princess.”

Taking my hand under the sunlight, that’s what she said with a smile on her face.

That warm hand reminded me of the families I’d seen in the alleyway...tears flowed down my face.

“D-do you not like it? How about another name...”

Seeing me react like that, my lady sat up hurriedly, looking concerned. It was a very funny sight, but my tears still refused to stop.

I had been saved—in two different ways.

I hadn't just been rescued from a dangerous situation; my new mistress had given me a goal for survival, me who had already given up on survival.

So I didn't want her to be troubled or pained. I want to protect her from all the trouble and pain that I can.

Since she's arrived in the capital, she hasn't truly smiled even once. No matter when, she always wears a tired look on her face.

Of course, we came to the capital initially to soothe the riot, but that wasn't just it. Because there was so much in the aftermath to deal with, negotiations to be carried out, it was natural to be tense all the time.

Although it was only natural...but even in time that should belong to only herself, milady's expression was always gloomy.

"Milady, is there anything wrong?"

When we were sending off Dean and his sister, he asked her this question.

Even a man who only appeared occasionally in her life had noticed it. Of course, me and everyone else who served her at the duke's mansion had noticed it as well.

But even after noticing it, there was nothing we could do. That was truly frustrating. This was because we couldn't even figure out what the reason for the moodiness was.

But, even if it were only a bit...I felt that what was corrupting milady's heart, was probably this place.

To her, this was the place where that abominable thing had happened. This time, something also happened that was torturing her inside...it was inevitable that she would hate this place.

Even so, fundamentally...I don't know why, but in this place, she didn't seem like herself.

I didn't know how to explain, but she seemed like she was disguising herself as a villain.

As the daughter of a duke's family, not all of her actions shone bright like when she was younger.

She's grown up...that's unavoidable.

Even as a servant, I sensed it. Living in upper class society, where everything was traps and schemes, she couldn't stay the same way that she used to be. If she did, the lowlifes who wanted to take advantage of her would only gather and swarm her.

Maintaining her cool, suppressing her emotions to make hard decisions was a necessary front for milady.

But I couldn't figure out why, in the capital, that side of her seemed more prominent.

Her sunny smile was gone, replaced by a cold smile that hid her true emotions.

It seemed like she was trying to play the villain in her every move.

Perhaps she realized that as well, in her own subconscious.

I yearned for the day that she could return to the territory, but there was still work to be done...it seemed so.

Wanting to go back as soon as possible, that urgency of longing—perhaps milady, who was praying for that day to come as well, was tired out by everything, anything.

All I could do was also pray for the day we returned to our territory.

## Chapter 108: A secret meeting at night | Part 1

*Knock knock.* I opened the door.

Seemingly without reason, Dida was standing there.

"It's quite late. What are you here for?"

"...Uh, sorry. Were you already sleeping?"

"Yes. Milady slept early today, so my work also ended earlier than usual."

"Ah, I see...really, though, don't open the door with your guard down like that. As a woman, you should stay on alert."

"Well, we don't really need to worry about that in this mansion...plus, I'm not completely without experience in these situations. If it comes to a desperate situation, I will use force."

I said this with a smile. An awkward, bitter smile flashed across Dida's face.

But quickly enough, his expression became serious.

"...what about opponents that you can't deal with? What will you do then? For example, I would be able to defeat you easily."

"True...out of everyone in this mansion, only you and Ryle are truly a challenge to confront. As for other enemies who might invade, if I do find any adversary truly challenging, they probably won't have come for my looks, but for my life. Well...I still trust you two, for the time being."

Our eyes met. In a late night like this, when both of us were silent and there were no other noises to interrupt us, the silence between us made the atmosphere exceedingly heavy.

"...You win. Of course I can't do anything if you say something like that."

Saying this with a smile, Dida shattered the serious atmosphere.

"So? What are you here for?"

"No, originally I was planning to have a drink or two with Ryle, but he's already asleep. So I thought of you."

“I can’t believe you...you’d call me out for something like that? I’m still a woman. If strange rumors start spreading about us, I’m not responsible.”

“That’s fine.”

Saying this, he laughed. I couldn’t read the true intentions of this man before me.

“Well...it’s true that it’s late. You’re getting up early tomorrow, right? Sorry.”

“Hold on a minute.”

“I’ve already woken up anyways...it’s a rare opportunity. Let’s go have a drink. I’ll go in and change, wait a minute for me.”

“All right.”

After that, I changed and walked out of the room.

Going to a bar or somewhere like that...it was quite a strange time for that. In the end we started drinking in the servants’ chat room.

The chat room is a room that all the servants share. As per its namesake, it’s a place where servants can communicate and say whatever they want.

Duke Armenia’s family has a mansion corresponding to its social status. More than half of that space is specifically for servants.

To maintain such a huge mansion and allow the masters of the house to live comfortably, they ended up needing a huge group of servants; at the same time, this structure was very fitting for a family that treated its servants so kindly.

“What do you want to drink? I brought this.”

“...Isn’t this a Makarama\* specialty product? How did you get it?”

“I grabbed it from Master.”

What a startling declaration, I couldn’t help but sigh.

“You...”

“Isn’t it great? Master felt sorry about what happened, especially to me and Ryle. He said that this way he’d be making it up to us.”

Saying this, that bitter, awkward smile came onto his face again.

Seemed to be quite a fit for this man's personality...thinking that, I accepted the bottle from him without a word.

"...If this is to repay you for your hard work, should I be taking a share like this?"

"Ryle said he didn't want it. It didn't really count as labor anyways."

*That's what you say*, I thought to myself as I took out two cups and began to pour us drinks.

Of course I knew that the two of them were busy running about each day for Master. They trained the soldiers as aides to the coaches.

At the same time, they protected milady and carried out various other tasks, all while using their free time to train everyone who followed them from the territory to the capital.

Recently I hadn't seen them around mostly because they were so busy with all of that.

In the past I'd also brought up the fact that they could have appealed to the master or milady to take a break from their work in the mansion.

But Ryle was stubborn. The man before me, on the other hand, bragged that he was "only going to Master's place to play".

We took the full wine glasses into our hands.

"Cheers."

The clear sound of glasses bumping together echoed through the room.

We poured the wine into our mouths.

A taste that was a bit sweet, but also quite rich spread open in my mouth.

"Ah...how delicious. A Makarama product indeed."

"...Yes. You really got something good out of this."

"Everything that Master owns is good wine. He's such an alcoholic that he's needlessly picky about it. That's why people call him the drinking guard."

Laughing, Dida poured all the rest of the wine down his throat.

“Time to go back, I guess. Finally.”

He said suddenly.

“Yes. So you don’t have to keep running between the mansion and Master’s place.”

“True. There are still various things to prepare.”

“...Are you also looking forward to going back?”

“‘Also’?”

“Don’t read too deeply into it. Just answer the question.”

“Hmm...I don’t know if I can truly call it a return. Where I am must be where milady is at. So it’s a bit strange for me to return to the territory.”

“True.”

This man was also like me, willing to sacrifice himself for his lady. His usual arrogant attitude made a lot of people question his loyalty though.

“But...well, when we go back to the territory with our lady...there are really too many obstacles here. We can’t really be by her side like we can back there... most importantly, there are so many people here who surpass us in power by far.”

“There don’t seem to be that many people who are stronger than you?”

I said this, playing dumb. Dida laughed. He seemed to understand as well. There was a strange bitterness in his eyes, a bitterness that he couldn’t express in words.

“I was kidding. Yeah, in the capital, you truly feel that you’re insignificant, weak. What we have...before the crushing strength of political power. No matter how long you train, you can never compare to that.”

“Exactly. So I want to go back soon as well—as milady’s protector.”

“Yes...”

\* I didn’t find this in the translations before, so I just ran with this

romanization.



## Chapter 109: A secret meeting at night | Part 2

“What about you, making that expression? What, do you want to be complained about by some noble? Or are you unhappy about receiving the strict instruction of the senior maid once more?”

“Are you going to say that in front of her?”

“I wouldn’t dare.”

He laughed out loud while I sighed.

“No, not because of that...it’s just that I’m a bit troubled.”

“Whatever you’re being troubled about...either way, it must have something to do with the mistress.”

“What do you mean, ‘either way’?”

I glared at him, while he laughed, “Ah, sorry, what a disrespectful thing for me to say.” Seeing his reaction, I realized that what I was doing was letting out my frustration at him, so I sighed again.

“...Well, you’re not wrong. What I’m thinking about does have to do with milady.”

“...has something gone wrong with her?”

His voice and expression immediately became serious.

Seeing that, I felt at ease—to this man, milady was of massive important.

“You should have sensed it as well? The longer she stays in the capital, the worse she seems to look and feel.”

“That’s true.”

Dida nodded with a bitter smile.

“Because she has to keep her guard up, it’s no wonder that she’s becoming like that. But at the same time, I’m unhappy that we’re so helpless in this regard. As you say, there’s a massive, insurmountable power blocking me off...I think I’ve been too confident in my abilities up to this point.”

As those words came out of my mouth, a heavy, bitter sensation began to spread in my chest. I couldn't help but mock myself.

"Yes—well, so what? Everyone has something that they should do, their area of specialty."

"I understand that. But I can't do anything..."

An irreplaceable territory. Before me there was a wall that I could never cross. Because I understood this, I was in pain.

"No, you don't understand. For example, my specialty is being milady's protector. My body is a wall, and protecting her is my mission, my specialty...in that specialty, I won't lose to anyone. I won't step down for anyone. Even if I were facing off against you."

I didn't understand...yes, as I was denied power, the fury of helplessness filled my heart as I glared at Dida.

But what he said next made me relinquish all possibility of retorting.

"Well then, where is your specialty? Yours is accompanying her, helping her in her work. I couldn't do that. I couldn't make delicious red tea, couldn't help her get dressed, couldn't coordinate her schedule, let alone help with her work."

"That...I can't say for sure, but you're not wrong."

"I know you work hard. You learned self-defense from Master, learned the fundamentals of work from Mr. Sebastian...I know you're working on expanding your specialty tirelessly. And of course, it's good that this will be useful for our mistress. But isn't it also good that each human is limited in how much they can expand their specialty? If she thinks that these are your duties, that means she's handed a very important part of her own duties to you. And you've responded to outside requests and have deepened your skills within your own specialty as much as you possibly can."

Dida gulped down all the wine remaining in his cup.

"Am I wrong in saying that?"

"...No, not at all..."

I felt like something blunt had hit my head.

I wasn't too confident, but too proud.

Just like Ryle and Dida keep improving their protective abilities, Merida keeps improving her culinary skills, and Rehme keeps expanding her knowledge base.

Sei, Moneda as well, keep working hard to complete their duties.

Everyone is working hard at the duties they've been given, working at the specialty they possess.

"So what you're saying is that if we can't control certain things, we should just try to support milady however we can?"

I also poured the rest of my wine down my throat.

"...Yes. To calm her spirits, I'll do my best to accompany her, be by her side."

This was different from the self-hatred of earlier.

I also had my pride.

Just like Dida said he wouldn't step away from his duties as a guard, I also had my duties to attend to.

"See, that's the expression we all know and love!"

Saying this, Dida laughed out loud as usual.

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# Chapter 110: Return

“Finally, we’re back...”

I exclaimed.

...It really had been so long.

Compared with the season before our nation’s founding celebration day, I hadn’t stayed that long in the capital this time.

Even so, I felt like this...perhaps because every day here was so concentrated, so dense.

Last time I came back I also sighed a breath of relief, but this time I was even more relieved.

When I arrived at the mansion, all the servants came out to greet me.

“Welcome back.”

Everyone seems on the verge of both laughter and tears. I couldn’t help but also tear up a bit.

I really made everyone worry.

“We’re glad that you have returned safely...I, for one, am very happy. Please do rest well today.”

“Thank you, Sebastian.”

If this were any other time, I would have gone straight to the study. But this time I went back to my room.

That was because today I actually wanted to do what everyone said and rest.

At my leisure, I enjoyed a cup of red tea that Tanya had made for me.

Suddenly, the curtains began to shudder because of the wind. As if invited by the wind, I stood up and approached the window.

And then, I gazed upon the territory from my window.

It was so beautiful, this landscape. Everywhere was permeated with green,

and the parallel streets extending into the distance. I...loved the view.

Looking over this view that all previous generations of the family had worked to protect and cultivate, I felt a true pride for the heritage that I shared with them in the form of the blood flowing through my body.

I stared out at the scene before me, breathing out. I was so glad that we found a way to calm this riot...

That way, I could continue caring for this land.

"Ah...right, Tanya, can you call over Ryle or Dida?"

"Yes, milady. Are you going somewhere...?"

"Yes. I can't just relax because I'm in the mansion."

"True. Please wait for a minute."

Tanya left the room, but walked back in quickly.

"I bumped into Dida."

"Thank you, Tanya....Dida, could you come with me for a walk?"

"No problem. By the way, where are we going?"

"To my grandfather's."

"Ah...there. I understand. My duty is to accompany milady wherever you wish to go."

"Thank you. Tanya, could you prepare a bouquet for me...do you want to come as well?"

"Of course. I'll go now and prepare. Please wait for a moment."

Tanya, Dida and I started walking...15 minutes later, we arrived at the place, where the trees grew tall and lustrous.

This was where the previous heads of house slumbered. For some reason, we hadn't picked out a cemetery, but chose for it to be here.

I don't understand why. But from here they could gaze upon the Armenia land...and rest here, alongside the mansion that held so many memories. That made me jealous.

I paused before one of the tombstones that was still very new.

“...Grandfather.”

From Tanya’s hands I took the bouquet and put it in front of the tombstone.

Grandfather had passed away before I was admitted to the Academy. He was a gentle man completely different from my father, who had the face of a demon king. Because my grandmother was a kind, gentle person as well, I’d always wondered who my father had taken after.

But that’s beside the point.

Since I became the substitute leader, sometimes I would recall my grandfather and come here to visit him.

I think that he loved this land more than anyone else.

In my memory, just like I stood by the window gazing upon the territory, he often brought me when I was young along and looked upon the land as he spoke about it with pride.

He was so gentle. Even after I became substitute leader, I couldn’t help but think that it must have been difficult for him to work in the palace, where liars and the power-hungry took up most of the space.

But now things were different.

When I was participating in territorial politics, I often found traces of his work and couldn’t help but sigh to myself...while also allowing for self-deprecation.

Laughing at myself—for only seeing one side of a person and making the snap judgement that “this must be the kind of person he was.”

Anyone would understand it if they thought about it—the face that my grandfather showed me couldn’t be the same he showed when he was working. Also, I only retained memories of him when I was young. Could I really judge his character based on those shallow impressions?

I could only revolutionize the politics of my territory thanks to the foundation that he had laid for me.

I only realized this when I began to work on public institutions and

equipment. My grandfather's work was everywhere.

Those policies had really been able to predict things not only 10 years, but decades later, especially in terms of confronting disasters. I couldn't help but be amazed at them.

...I also can't deny that to build a solid foundation for the future, I keep overlooking the foundations below my own feet.

I had been carrying this work out at the same time that I was dealing with my other duties...he really did love this land. I couldn't help but be moved.

"I'm back."

Saying this, I put my hands together in prayer.

I wanted to apologize for bringing chaos to the territory, and pray that my grandfather continue to protect and guard us in the future.

Although I knew there would be no response, my thoughts came in torrents.

"...I'm done."

I stood up, turned around. Tanya and Dida were smiling.

"Let's go back."

My mood had cleared up a lot, and we left.

## Chapter 111: Busy

“I want to learn more about the contents of this report. Please help me summon whoever was responsible for it.”

I pointed at the mountain of files on my desk.

“The ones over here are already decided. Return them to the various departments.”

And now it was time for the mountain next to me...the thought that there would still be more after I finished this load was almost enough to make me cry.

“That’s the part that needs editing. There’s too much needless waste proposed. If that section is necessary, please note your reasons for retaining it.”

And then there were more files next to me. I could already imagine the folks at this department hanging their heads in disappointment...those in the finance department should be of the same opinion as me.

“The bridge there is quite old...compared to our equipment over here, perhaps it would be better to fix the bridge first.”

...and it was only the second day back.

I had been surrounded by several mountains of paperwork since morning when I arrived in the study, and had been taking care of them slowly.

At this moment all I hoped for was that I could have a clone, but at the same time—“If you have time for those thoughts, why not spend more time working?”—that’s how I encouraged myself.

Even if I managed to somehow lessen the load of files just a bit, Sebastian kept bringing more and more in. The total amount wasn’t lessening at all.

If in the very beginning I put all the files to be dealt with together, they might not even fit in a soccer stadium.

Even someone like me would feel my motivation and energy draining away. I should be thankful for my aides, who brought me the files in groups.

Although Sebastian made an apologetic face when he brought them over, the



situation was unavoidable because of my long absence.

Thanks to the riot this time, all the plans I had originally made had to be delayed significantly, so I had to work harder now.

In the mansion, some people had stopped coming to work because of the rumors spreading about me. But even after I was determined to be innocent, they still didn't come back.

If you asked me what I wanted to say...well, it was just that we didn't have enough people on hand. It was a very serious issue. I owed a lot to the officials of the territory who somehow kept working under these circumstances. More importantly, I don't want those who are laboring on the frontline with full commitment to fall ill due to overexertion.

"It's around that time of the year when the regions are supposed to hand in their tax reports. Before then, we need to handle everything that must be handled."

As I said this, Sebastian's expression changed.

Of course, this didn't mean anything good. Quite the contrary, actually, it signified trouble ahead.

...I understood. With the amount of people we had right now, we couldn't get any more work done.

Even so, tax reports were very important, so that we could understand the profits and income of each department and region. Those numbers were essential in measuring the future economic trends in the territory.

If profits were high, we could expect corresponding expenditure. If personal income grew, we could anticipate that people would relax when it came to spending; if the merchants' guild's income grew, we could look forward to them using those funds as capital when it came to opening up more businesses.

Because of this, I wanted to thoroughly read the tax reports so I could make use of them in the future.

...But under these circumstances, I couldn't do that. I needed to come up with some way to deal with the issue quick.

Scratch, scratch...the sound of pen scratching against paper echoed through the room.

“...It’s about time to take a break, milady.”

Tanya said this with some concern.

...Ah, it had gotten late already? I looked out of the window. The sun had already started to sink.

“...Hey, Tanya, I have a task I need your help with.”

“Please let me know whatever I can help with.”

“Please make a list of personnel that left because of the riot. If we can also gather what others around them thought of them and their social circle, I would be very thankful.”

“I understand.”

“Then, as you suggested, I’ll take a break. Hold on, help me call Sebastian over.”

Tanya lowered her head, leaving the room.

After that, I enjoyed the tea Tanya had prepared for me while I savored my break. At the same time, I was reading the letter sent by the Anderson family, the main couple.

In other words, my aunt and uncle.

The Armenia family and the Andersons had had deep ties with one another for a long time—since my grandfather’s generation.

My grandfather and Andersons have also been similarly caring. Since the whole Academy business and the riot, they’ve always asked after me.

Although the Anderson family’s territory is technically close to the Armenia family’s western side, there are steep mountains and cliffs separating us. If we wanted to visit each other, we needed to take the sea route. Most importantly, we were both busy, so we ended up relying on using letters to communicate with one another.

After I read the letter, I was about to start working again when Sebastian

walked in.

“I was thinking that it was about time for milady to start work again...”

“Just in time, Sebastian. I wanted to ask you something.”

“What is it?”

“I trust that you’ve already recruited some temporary helpers at the merchants’ guild?”

That’s how Dean came to work here. Although it wasn’t anything big, he also helped with very detailed calculations, the organization of files and so on. People were recruited for work that required a lot of helping hands.

“Yes.”

“How is the recruitment going?”

“...Not ideal. Right now we’re in a busy time. Other places are hiring as well, many of whom can offer better pay. Plus, we can’t just hire anyone here.”

“I see...”

I sighed.

“...About that, Sebastian. I had a suggestion.”

“What would that be?”

“How about recruiting some people from the students of the Academy’s officials’ leadership program?\*

Hearing my suggestion, Sebastian’s eyes went wide.

“The content of their job would be various miscellaneous tasks. Although they’re students, if they’ve taken classes at the Academy, then they should be able to do the job. It would be a huge help for us, with how busy we are, and it would give the students a chance to learn about working in a real work environment.”

“Yes...this is a good proposal. I’ll go inquire within the Academy.”

“Then take this.”

I handed the letter to the president to Sebastian. We needed to use my title

as much as possible.

“If he agrees, then can I let you do the rest of the negotiations as well?”

“Of course.”

“Then I’ll hand this task off to you, Sebastian. Thank you.”

“Yes, milady.”

## Chapter 112: Something unshakeable

Under the weak light of the oil lamp, I scribbled furiously.

I felt that these few days, I keep hearing the same voice.

“...Hm...”

After I finished writing, I set the pen in my hand down and stretched. It wasn't a creaking sound, but something slightly heavier than that, resounding through my body.

The moment my arms extended straight, my body relaxed against the chair, my arms lazily dropping to the chair's arm. Although it was quite an uncultured way to sit, right now since I was alone it was fine.

In this position where my field of vision had become lower, I picked up the document I had just written and stared at it.

...Yep. Today's work was finished as well.

Speaking of which...right, thinking of the fact that I hadn't taken a single step out of this room since I entered it brought a bitter smile to my face.

If Tanya hadn't reminded me, I probably wouldn't even have remembered to eat.

When I was concentrating, I had the habit of ignoring everything around me. This was a trait that I shared with the previous version of myself before I had recalled all the memories from my past life. To say that it was imprinted in my soul was not an exaggeration.

“...Excuse me.”

A knock at the door. Tanya walked into the room.

“I saw that the light was on, so I guessed...you seem to still be working.”

Tanya looked quite concerned and let out a sigh.

I laughed at her reaction.

Coming back from the capital, I felt that Tanya had changed. In a good way, of

course.

Should I say it was as if something troubling her had disappeared, or something tense inside her had relaxed...there was a certain gentleness to it.

“Please forgive me for speaking out of turn, but you should rest. Perhaps I don’t understand how important your duties are...but what I do understand is that if you collapse from exhaustion again, that will cause any progress on them to slow down.”

It’s just that she spoke in pretty much the same way.

“Heh heh heh, you’re right, you’re right. I was thinking that it was about time to rest as well.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“But before then, I want to hear your report. I was thinking that you should have finished up by now, so I was waiting for you here.”

“Then...I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to make you wait.”

“I was the one who insisted on waiting. It’s fine. Show me the report.”

As I read the file she handed to me, I listened to her explanation, which was filled with personal insights not recorded on the page.

“...I see.”

I burned what I had read in the fire of the oil lamp. If there was a fireplace I would have used that, but unfortunately in the mild weather of this place, there was no such thing.

Even so, there were plenty of files that couldn’t be read by anyone else. Especially in my study, where I carried out most of my work.

That was why I poured some coarse sand into the vase that was set up at the front end of the desk, and threw the burning file in.

“So it seems that there are people with those views...after all...”

“...It’s a pity. Humans are such capricious creatures. If they don’t have something unshakeable holding them down, they are even more so. So even the most uncorrupted organizations will have members who waver. There’s

nothing we can do about that.”

“Yes. I know that all too well...that humans are capricious. No matter what, I’ve experienced that myself. But it’s more than that, isn’t it, Tanya? You can say it out loud. When a little girl like me takes over, I’m likely to be looked down upon.”

“That...”

“Whatever, forget it. It’s not something we can solve by talking about. All right, Tanya. Go and gather everyone up. Location...hm. How about the newly constructed church?”

“Understood. Do you really mean everyone?”

“Yes. To be honest, after hearing your report, although I can guess what kind of actions those people will take in the future...I still want to see them again. Well, they probably won’t show up anyways.”

“Understood.”

“But either way, Tanya, it’s quite impressive that you could go into so much depth with your research. Have you been improving your skills?”

“Of course. For you, milady. Plus, information is ultimately just information. It’s only because you trust me and use the information I bring to you that they realize their ultimate value.”

True. Information is intangible. If it’s mistaken then it’s just a regular rumor, or a result of wishful thinking. To filter the truths from the mix and trust them is very difficult.

“...Tanya, to you, what am I?”

“You’re the ‘unshakeable part of my existence’...my pillar, my support.”

“Is that so? Tanya, you will not waver. Because I can sense that, you’re as good as a second pair of eyes and ears. That’s why I can trust and use the information that you bring me.”

“I am highly honored, milady.”

“...All right, I’m going to bed. Tanya, please help with cleaning up.”

“Understood.”

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## Chapter 113: Convincing

The new church was really a solemn building. As if trying to show off the power of the territory, it was adorned with luxurious decorations...or was that explanation a bit too forced? Thinking these self-deprecating thoughts, I smiled at myself.

It was my first visit to this place. The reason I hadn't visited before was the reason for this building's construction. To protest the substitute territory leader's activities against the church, I had abandoned my work and became a hermit at home—with all my other colleagues.

If I were to put my mood at the time into words, it would probably be outrage. Iris abandoned the church. This showed us the correct way to proceed...I believed that justice was on my side. That's why I took action.

Even though I knew that a new church had been built, I viewed this as Iris's way of covering up her mistakes and refused to visit the church.

...Even after it was declared that she was innocent.

No, precisely because it was declared. That caused an even deeper sense of denial—"We've already come so far!"

At the time, I abandoned her in the role of substitute leader. That much was true. Even though I wasn't exactly on the side of the people from the church who victimized her directly, I stood on the side that spurned her.

No...it was because although I stood by her, I had still abandoned her that my actions were even more despicable. That's what I thought, at least—when everything had gone to chaos, if I were to really condemn her, I shouldn't have holed up in my home, but advised her in person...

Even though it might draw the rage of the substitute leader, I should have used my words to speak out against her, instead of abandoning everything in the very beginning because I felt that my words couldn't express what I had to say...

But with how things had turned out, it was already too late.

That's why I maintained my attitude. Before long I'd have to resign from my position. Even if I didn't, I would be fired anyways...

That was when the invitation arrived, from that same substitute territory leader...Iris Lana Armenia. It wasn't quite an invitation, but a group summoning; the moment I saw it, I smiled bitterly.

This was probably related to whether I would stay or leave. Although it wasn't spelled out, it was easy enough to guess. The only question still remaining was: why would she put the meeting place in the church?

It was time to bring things to a head.

Yes. I pumped myself up with enough courage to come here today.

Looking around, I saw that the church filled slowly with people who had abandoned their positions like me.

I knew some of them. But because of the heavy atmosphere, none of us were planning to chat each other up, making the atmosphere even more crushing.

"Thank you for coming today."

As if to rip apart this atmosphere, she...Iris, appeared.

With a warm smile on her face, she looked around.

"Although some have not yet arrived, the time has already come. Allow me to begin."

Her voice echoed through the church, ringing in my mind.

"Everyone here abandoned their work as an official when I was being threatened with expulsion. Today, although I came here to communicate with all of you...do any of you have anything to say to me?"

No one said anything. Even so, I wondered whether I should speak up, announce that I was quitting. But her heavy tone of voice shut me up.

"Then let me ask everyone. What is an official?"

Her expression didn't change. It was still a smile. But somehow, this put even more pressure on everyone.

"You, over there."

Perhaps feeling a bit impatient toward all of us who remained silent, she started to call on people.

“Yes. Officials are essential as hand and feet to the ruler of a territory, in helping them handle matters.”

The person answering had a smile on his face that seemed to say “I’ve been waiting for so long” and made a model answer.

“Is that so...then, what about you?”

She pointed to someone who was frowning because of that answer.

The one who was pointed at started to shudder.

“I...I think so too.”

“If that’s the case, then in this riot, none of you are officials anymore.”

Just like other noble women, she covered her mouth with her fan and began to giggle.

“Because, isn’t that what you did? You betrayed me, the brain, the mind. Abandoned your job as officials. If listening to the commands of the mind is your job, then I don’t need any of you disobedient limbs. Isn’t that right?”

The color drained from both of their faces.

“Then let me ask you a different question. Why is it that in this riot, you abandoned your job and stayed home in protest? You over there, can you answer me?”

Finally she pointed at me. I couldn’t look away...even though I knew that, I couldn’t help but want to avoid her gaze because of the pressure her mere presence exerted.

“...Apologies for whatever offense I may cause, but may I ask you a question instead? What is a territory leader?”

Just as I had gathered up my spirits and wanted to answer...I was planning to answer in a way that wouldn’t enrage her, but I ended up speaking up in accusation. Even I was shocked at how brazen it was.

“I don’t like it when people answer questions with questions.”

“But for my answer, your response is important.”

Perhaps it was a strong idea, rooted too deeply in my mind to be rolled back.

It had nothing to do with pride or anything else. Just as she said, when I abandoned my job as an official, we had already lost that. All we could do was act out like this in an attempt to self-sabotage.

“The job of a leader is to stay prideful, protect citizens, be kind and merciful, push the territory to become rich and fertile for growth, guarantee a certain quality of life for their people, have a sense of belonging for their territory, lead but also be led...this is what I think that a leader’s duties should be.”

“Exactly. Exactly because that was what makes a leader a leader, I abandoned my job.”

“That wasn’t a very good explanation.”

As if very dissatisfied, she frowned.

“Excuse me. I also...I also think that a leader should lead and protect the people. That’s precisely why I abandoned my job because of this riot. The church is a support for our spirits, and someone who is accused by the church cannot lead the people. Leading reforms and such is fine. But that whole event is enough to make the people question and doubt the leader’s...in other words, your reforms. So, I withdrew into my home to protest your actions.”

“Hard to believe, that you can still say something like that. Aren’t you a capable one?”

Her words ignited a flame in my heart. Before I could continue arguing, she continued to speak.

“Do you dare say that there’s nothing in your heart that just hates being bossed around by a little girl as if she knows everything there is to know?”

But what she said next cooled the flames in my heart.

Deep down in my heart, where even I hadn’t noticed anything...no, in a place I hadn’t wanted to notice in the first place...she had exposed me.

It was true. I couldn’t deny what she had said.

I had always opposed her from taking the position of substitute leader. Why was she the one that the royal family noticed, yet wasn't punished? And how did she still become leader after that? I thought that this had to be our leader's whims, to grant her a decorative position.

She started to continuously interfere in territorial politics. Although in the beginning I was very unhappy with this, our territory became much more vibrant after that. When I learned that she had been praised by the queen, I stifled my dissatisfaction.

This dissatisfaction reemerged once again amidst the riots, and I joined the others who were stubbornly staying at home.

But...

"I can't deny that I've had those thoughts before. But what I just said is completely true, with no pretense of deception."

"Is that so...then, what is an official to you?"

"The limbs of the leader in protecting the people and enriching the land's development."

*Hu~*she exhaled. I sensed that in response to her reaction, my shoulders began to shudder.

I watched her expression shakily.

An expressionless, emotionless face. But in the next moment, she revealed the most dazzling smile yet of the whole meeting.

Her true smile should be beautiful enough to inspire fixation. But in that moment, instead of being beautiful, I felt that her smile was grand, magnificent, larger than life...I couldn't help but start shuddering a bit.

"I see. I see. Then you shouldn't have any reason to look like that, as if you're about to be sentenced to death."

It was only after she pointed it out that I realized that was my expression.

"Officials are limbs. If they betray me, the head, they will not be forgiven. But not reflecting and feeling remorse for one's people is a sin even greater than that. In that case, you should feel proud for protesting against me. There's no

need to feel shame. But it's better to say that by remaining inactive now, causing the political and economic spheres of the territory to fall into disarray, you are not protecting the people as you should. If you are officials who exist for the sake of the people, that, if anything, is your sin."

"But...I...you had no fault, and I..."

"With all that's happened, please do not harbor useless emotions like regret for accusing me. If you're still hanging onto feelings like that after so long, you're actually causing more trouble for me. Because from the very beginning, I never viewed you as companions."

"Then what are we?"

Her words were a shock to the system.

"I don't seek loyalty from you. All I want is the fruit of your work."

She said this as if singing.

"If you believe you live for the people, then work for them. Not for me, but for them. Your current position isn't just a protected one; but one that stands on the side of protecting the people. Be proud of that."

Her words became more and more powerful.

It was almost as if they were jumping out at me.

My heart swelled, scalding hot. A fire had been kindled, one that was completely different than the one beforehand.

No, I could see it behind her as well.

It was strange. A slender woman like her, so fragile-looking that it seemed a gust of wind would knock her over—where was she hiding all that energy? I couldn't help but try to puzzle it out.

"I don't want your loyalty. So I won't continue investigating this incident. Go back and get to work."

"Are you saying that you've forgiven us?"

Another man asked this very courteously. It was a meaningless question—I couldn't help but doubt myself for having that thought at all.

“Forgiving or not...I don’t demand your loyalty, so that’s a meaningless question. Those who acted out of anger toward me, or just followed the flow of everyone else’s actions...no matter what you were thinking doesn’t matter. As long as you don’t betray the territory, betray the people; that’s all I ask. Now, all of you standing here, I assume are the former...so, I invite you back. If not...”

“If not...”

Hearing that, she laughed.

I wanted to know, but at the same time I really didn’t.

“None of you need to know. Or, do you want to experience it for yourselves?”

Everyone there immediately began to shake their head.

“Is that so? That’s good. Then go back to work. Our time is limited.”

## Chapter 114: Preparing

After they all left, I vacantly gazed at the church.

“...You’ve been told quite sternly just now. It isn’t like you, Milady.”

At Tanya’s words, I smiled.

“I wonder how do you define something that is ‘*typical*’ of me...?”

At my inquiry, Tanya’s response was packed with words.

“Milady. Please excuse me for being presumptuous, but ever since Milady came to the royal capital, I think that you’ve changed quite considerably. You are working too hard and it feels like you aren’t afraid to show your own fault... I did not feel like that.”

At Tanya’s words, I blinked my eyes in astonishment.

“Indeed, I may have changed considerably along with the bargaining at the royal capital. ...No, it may be precisely since the time Dida asked for my resolution.”

That inquiry managed to smash my sweet thoughts. ...Only looking for the things ahead. Chasing after ideals, only moving forward. The sensation of “me” that worked as an employee in a peaceful world became my guideline of conduct.

I did not intend to deny that. However, I felt like I was just inside a dream, somewhere. Before the unreality of reincarnation, there was a feeling that I was only having a dream. I was trying not to look at the estrangement I felt.

However, that inquired surely smashed it all.

This is certainly the reality. Assuming the position of the feudal lord’s agent that is responsible of the people’s lives in a good way, but simultaneously, that goes for the bad meaning, too.

The moment I understood it, I bid my farewell to the “me” who was living surrounded by beautiful things. In a true sense, “I” bid my farewell to the gentle country called Japan.



I will not show the gap in which I feel like living another person's life anymore. Things such as condemnation and riots have all been dismissed.

"...It's okay. If I were to advance in the wrong path, there would be people who are by my side, that will stop me. Yes, that's what I would like to believe in."

"Just like Dida?"

"Yes, that's right."

Everyone is moving in order to fulfill my words. However, at times when I really make mistakes, they will voice their opinions... yes, I can believe that.

If it's the present me.

There are Sebas, Dida, Lyle, Rehme, then Sei and Merida... Also, Dean, too.

I feel like only Tanya seems to be affirming everything, somehow. But, that's fine.

"May I ask one more thing?"

At her question, I silently nodded.

"It may be too late at this point, but why did you gather those people in this church?"

"Ah, that is, you see..."

I let out a small laugh.

"I thought that they deserved it."

At my answer, Tanya tilted her head.

"This church is the symbol of that time's riot. Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that it is also the symbol of the future course for Daryl's faith."

Actually, Priest Ralph also said that.

Under the idea of the priest that managed it, this church proceeded to make house calls that are free of charge for the poor people. In addition, they also established institutions for orphans. It seems that there has been a gradual increase of people who actively follow their will and people in the territory of

the capital who help and act in accordance with their will. And that is exactly the shape of the good old church that Priest Ralph has talked about.

“I don’t think that I will actively oppose the church. The profit just doesn’t match together.”

I quickly turned my eyes towards the altar. I feel like it’s been a long time already ever since I went to make a speech in this place.

“...Does God really exist? That, I don’t know. I don’t know, but I believe in God. Although the God that I believe in is certainly not the existence believed in Daryl’s faith.”

“...Milady, that is...”

Due to my extreme remark, for a moment, blood drained from Tanya’s face.

“Did you already forget about the deeds of those who sang praises and declared themselves God’s representatives? ...They fabricated a nonexistent fact, and denunciate me, even after I got caught up with the power struggle.”

Those words that I spun while scorning turned out more extreme and prickly than what I was thinking inside my own mind.

“After all... although they claimed themselves as God’s representatives, the ones managing the organization are nothing more than humans, and so, in the end it got mixed up with the ideal and the ulterior motives of humans, causing it to be distorted from its original form, to be deformed. That too, is something inevitable. However, that is precisely why I don’t trust the church... no, I can’t trust them.”

What I ought to do is not only to pray to the God.

Even more so since there are certain fellows who would carry through their own thoughts while using God as their shield.

“I have told you before, right? This is where my resolution materialized. I do not intend to deny everything about Daryl’s faith. Because I understand that religion is an effective way to unite people together. Still, as it was proven this time, the organization called the Daryl’s faith is not a clean organization. They are participating in the kingdom’s power struggle, something which is quite

individual. That is why, I can't believe that they are standing up and taking the nation's side. If I think that it won't be beneficial for the nation, then I have to fight it. I won't flatter the Daryl's language, nor will I abide their rules, I will oppose them to the bitter end... that is, the conclusion that I came up with. Also, I would like it if they also possess that kind of dignity. Not entrusting everything to the God, not excessively flattering the organization, but to protect the people with their own hands."

I turned to look at Tanya, and immediately turned to face the altar once again.

"...You know, I don't feel any remorse from demolishing that old church. I will accept the others' slander that I destroyed the church and that I was the one who brought about that riot. Yet there is another particular thing that I regret... which is, my incompetency for being unable to predict that the riot would occur."

"...To predict that kind of thing is a difficult feat to accomplish. Actually, hasn't it been said by the head of the family, too?"

"Yeah, that may be true."

I let out a small laugh. At that moment, the side door opened. ...The ones who appeared from there were the children who enrolled in the institution that this church established.

"I, it's big sister Iris!!"

"It's true-!! Why are you here?"

"Let's go together to teacher's place!!"

The lively voice resounded in the church. The children noisily ran and encircled me.

"Very well. However, if I abruptly go there, everyone will be surprised. That's why, can you go there and tell everyone that I will be coming?"

I squatted down so that my eyes could meet theirs, and told them so.

"...Really, will you come?"

"Of course. It's a promise."

When I said that and smiled, the children agreed and they ran once more towards the side door.

“...Because I want to protect their future. That’s why, I have no regret.”

“Milady...”

“Hey, Tanya. Those children are the small you.”

To my words, Tanya tilted her head in confusion.

“Just like you, when you were little. No, perhaps your situation may have been more difficult than theirs. ...At that time, I couldn’t help but to pick you up when I noticed you. After all, I want to protect the children who are just like you... that’s what I think, and that’s how I’ve been doing my work. I have no regret at all.”

“...They will surely be happy, right?”

“Oh my, Tanya, are you now unhappy?”

“Of course I am happy. Because I am happy... they too, will be happy. That is what I am thinking. Because at any rate, they are all the small me, right?”

At her words, I spurted out.

I never expected to hear that kind of words from Tanya.

“Well then, I think they are eagerly waiting. Milady, shall we go?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

And then, together with Tanya, I went towards the door.

## Chapter 115: Reserved

“Teacher Minae—”

I was in the middle of preparing dinner, but these four children burst into the kitchen.

“It’s dangerous here, children. Didn’t I tell you to tell your teacher before you came in?”

“Sorry...”

All of them were staring at the floor, looking remorseful. I hurriedly bottled up my anger and stopped what I was working on to face them.

“Is there anything you want from me?”

“Um, Miss Iris is here.”

“What?”

Their answer scared me, to the point that I couldn’t help but shout. Seeing how unnatural I was acting, the children started to look a bit confused.

“Le—no, Miss Iris is here? Are you sure?”

I needed to hurry and prepare tea...although that was what I wanted to do, we didn’t have any left and there wasn’t enough time to go and buy more. Plus, I had decided that we needed to be more frugal before the next donation came.

“A-all in all, we need to go out and welcome her...”

“Apologies for the disturbance!”

Yep, that was Tanya’s voice. There was nothing else I could do but walk toward the entrance. Although I did not look presentable enough to meet her, it was even more impolite to keep her waiting.

“W-welcome...I...Lady Iris, Miss Tanya.”

Although it was only a short way, because I had run over and because of how nervous I was, I felt that I could barely breathe.

The sight of Lady Iris filled me with a strange feeling. She seemed slimmer

than I remembered, and her skin was even paler than pale, almost to the degree of translucence.

“Don’t be so nervous, Minae. I’m just a normal friend coming to her friend’s house to have some fun.”

Lady Iris’s stunning words disarmed me, and I spoke once again immediately.

“...friend?”

“Oh yes. Isn’t that what everyone else thinks as well?”

“Miss Iris, what are we going to play today?”

“Hey, hey, Miss Iris, I can read now!”

“Miss Iris said she was going to play with me!”

These kids...they were surrounding her with smiles on their face, speaking whatever came to their minds.

But this didn’t seem to bother her at all. In fact, her smile seemed quite genuinely happy.

“Haha...that’s true, we did make a promise. Then let’s play a new game before we start reading!”

The children cheered, taking Lady Iris’s hand to prepare to play a game.

These kids...how could they talk to a lady like that? It seemed like it was too late for me to stop them.

Lady Iris was of noble blood, and was a substitute leader...I had kept these secrets from the children. Even if I asked them now to be less impolite to her, they probably wouldn’t obey if I couldn’t give them a reason for it.

“To me, Minae, you and these children are important friends. Your attitude is making me sad...as a matter of fact, you’re blocking the way!”

Just like that, she was already playing games with the children. When she passed by me she didn’t forget to joke with me.

Iris seemed to be setting the kids up as thieves, while she chased them around the room.

And she was a noble...although the scene before my eyes was a bit shocking, I still watched them quietly. The maid next to me also watched on, with a protective look. She was surprised too, but still smiled.

“Ah, caught you.”

Hearing Lady Iris’s voice, my eyes couldn’t help but follow. What I saw was a genuine smile on her face...one that seemed to come from the bottom of her heart.

“...Lady Iris, why...”

“What about Miss Iris?”

Miss Tanya asked me this in a harsh tone of voice after hearing me murmur under my breath. The sound of her voice sent chills down my spine.

“I’m sorry. Why is Lady Iris being so gentle to us?”

My words made Tanya’s eyes go big. It was rare to see her look so comical. But I felt more sadness from the expression than anything else, the same feeling as when you don’t really know if you’re smiling or not.

“She was dragged down by us, but she never blamed us. Not only that, but she came here especially to visit us.”

The whole riot had given Lady Iris so much trouble, and we were the root reason for all of that. If we...no, if I could have worked harder, then I wouldn’t have to ask so much from Lady Iris.

It was all because of us that she had been painted as guilty. But even so, her attitude hadn’t changed at all. We couldn’t do anything but be guarded and protected by her, and that in itself was somewhat tragic.

“That’s the kind of person that Miss Iris is.”

Tanya seemed very proud as she said this.

“You seem to be having a lot of fun. Would you like to rest for a while?”

As if responding to what we had just been talking about, Tanya appeared next to Lady Iris with a towel she’d gotten from who knows where.

When did she get over there? And where is that towel from? Even though I

couldn't help but question things like this, my eyes still stayed fixed on Lady Iris.

"...Lady Iris."

"What's wrong, Minae? You look so glum. Has anything happened?"

"No, of course not. We're being looked after so thoroughly."

"Is that so? That's good. If anything comes up, don't hesitate to let me know."

...really, why did she have to be so...

She was nobility, after all, the heiress of a duke's family that normal citizens wouldn't even dare imagine talking to. An existence above the clouds, so to speak.

Why is it that she had to be so courteous, so kind, so thoughtful when interacting with insignificant people like us?

"I am very thankful for your attention...Lady Iris, may I ask you a question?"

"Is anything the matter?"

"Lady Iris, do you no longer take walks on the streets?"

"Um...why ask something like that?"

"We haven't seen you in a while, so we were worried!"

All the people she had visited—the lady that ran the flower shop, the man who owned the food court on the corner, and everyone else who lived along that road—were very worried about her.

Anywhere on this street, you'd be able to hear people talking about Lady Iris. It just showed how much she had become a part of our community.

In response to our question, Lady Iris flashed a bitter smile.

"...after I've shown myself like that on a higher level, I couldn't walk on the streets like I did in the past for safety reasons."

She was right. I lowered my head in disappointment, even if I had no right to be disappointed.

"But that's ultimately an excuse. No, it's a big factor...but the biggest one is just fear."



“Is that so?”

“Yes. I’m afraid to see how people think of me out there. After they learn ‘Iris’'s true identity, it’s inevitable that their attitudes will change. I’ve prepared myself for that. But haven’t I burdened everyone immensely this time? Although it’s good that no riots started...but if they knew I was nearby, they would probably at least complain a bit. How would everyone blame me...I can’t help but be afraid of that. All I want is for you to please forget my lack of capability as a substitute leader.”

In the end she seemed to smile weakly. But my field of vision was already dark, so I couldn’t really see her expression.

What tainted my vision—fury that I could barely suppress? Or desperation at my own powerlessness?

It seemed that it was both, but also neither. Compared to that, a bitter, suffocating urge seemed to surge from within me.

“Lady Iris...I know what I’m going to say is rude, but please let me say it.”

I felt my voice trembling, but not because of fear, but because I was trying to hold back the urge to shout.

“P-please don’t treat us as idiots...”

In the end I still shouted the words out.

“It’s true that from your point of view, we are weak and pitiful existences, living our lives in a narrow world, completely ignorant of what happens above us, trying our hardest just to maintain our own lives.”

Every day all we did was work and eat, and repeat that every day. In our dreams, all we hoped was that the next day would be just as peaceful as this one.

But at least we knew the value of peaceful days, of not having to worry where our food would come from tomorrow, or not having to worry about how we would get our salaries.

Whatever fancy policies the people above were using to affect our lives—that we didn’t understand. It might as well be something that happened above the

clouds. Even if we did understand it, there wouldn't be much change. But we live as if that were a guarantee. That's why we could talk about what was going on up there like it happened in another world, spreading the word as if they were just some irrelevant, fun rumors.

When it reached the point where we could feel the environment around us worsening, many of us would lose our jobs and our money. The prices would gradually begin to rise...and then the atmosphere on the street would become dreary, everyone wearing an exhausted, hopeless face.

I've seen days like that before. Before I was picked up as a nun, I saw it in other territories.

But it was only then that people would really start complaining upwards, which would result in oppression from above. That would only make the people even more resistant, and things would just get worse and worse on the streets.

Everything that happened with Lady Iris this time did make everyone a bit restless, and people did start blaming her.

Even so...

"Even so, we're not idiots. Lady Iris, you've done so much for all of us. We know that..."

Of course, many of us were supporters of Lady Iris.

For example, hasn't life become easier recently!

It seemed like she was a good leader who thought of us after all!

All that beforehand must just be some kind of weird miscommunication.

We didn't know what happened with Lady Iris. Even if we did, we might not be able to understand the details. But Lady Iris has made everyone's lives more comfortable, put smiles on more faces. That much I can understand.

The number of doctors has increased, and it's much easier now for people to go for a visit to the hospital and get the care they need.

More and more people can read and write, meaning fewer and fewer are being deceived or embarrassed by salesman from other lands.

More and more children smile while talking about their future hopes and dreams.

Even the people who couldn't plant crops have found other ways to make money.

So many people supported Lady Iris together.

Of course, there were still many others who treated the whole thing as a novelty, and just talked about her as a matter of gossip.

"We are weak."

Our positions weren't the same as hers. What we possessed was different. The power we possessed and the resulting force available to us was different. Of course, our level of wealth was vastly different. Even so, even so...

"But we don't want to use our own weakness as an excuse to blame Lady Iris."

Lady Iris is only human. Even she can become so thin, so pale.

The people who would still blame their benefactor after she got to this stage—I won't forgive them.

The woman who runs the flower shop, the man who runs the food court feel the same way.

All of us are remorseful. Especially after we found out that the "Lady Iris" we had thought was so above us was actually one and the same with the "Miss Iris" who stood by our sides.

We wanted to do something about it, but we couldn't. We hated ourselves for being poor and weak, but never used it as an excuse.

And it wasn't just us on this street.

People who know of what me and the children have been through yet can't do anything about it are the same.

Somewhere where I don't know of, there must be many people who are being helped by Lady Iris, treating her as "Miss Iris" without knowing her true identity.

"So I ask of you, Miss Iris. Please don't continue to blame yourself. I won't

forgive anyone who blames you, even if it's yourself."

I said it. I said everything I wanted to say, but the sense of achievement only lasted a little while.

Seeing Lady Iris's expression blew all of my tiny sense of achievement away.

W-why was she crying?

I've said too much...immediately, I felt all the blood drain from my face.

Lady Iris looked so beautiful as she cried silently. I couldn't help but stare.

No, no, I had been rude...right when I was unsure what to do, all the children gathered by my side.

"Ah! Teacher, you made her cry!"

"Teacher did something bad..."

Even the children were angry with me...I did seem to have said too much. Would I be arrested for it?

"...That's wrong, everyone. I'm happy right now."

"Happy? You're crying."

"Yes. Sometimes you cry when you're too happy. Your teacher has said something that made me very happy. I was so happy I couldn't help but cry."

"Really? Wow, it's just like our teacher to say something so awesome."

The kids seemed to believe her words. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"...All right, everyone. Today I brought delicious treats. Go and line up in front of Tanya."

"Treats!"

All the kids flocked to Tanya happily.

"...Minae."

"Y-yes?"

"...Thank you."

"N-not at all. I apologize for my lack of manners. Please don't blame the

children. If you want to punish anyone, please punish me.”

Lady Iris lowered her head, looking confused.

“Why would I punish you? You made me so happy!”

Heh...Lady Iris wiped her tears away with a smile on her face.

“...After I’m finished with my current work, I have to consider coming out again and visiting!”

Her words made me lower my head at first, but soon enough I understood what she was saying and smiled.

“Everyone will look forward to that day.”

Yes. We needed to spread our smiles to Lady Iris.

## Chapter 116: True nature

“Deuban...why must you approach me so silently?

Although he must have noticed the slight displeasure in my tone, the man approaching from behind retained his smile.

“Ah ha, please accept my apologies! It’s really second nature for me. Please forgive me.”

“Even when you speak seriously, I can’t take your words to heart.”

“Of course it’s natural that you would think this way, especially given your perspective...what a pretty wrist, fitting for a princess of this nation!”

“...I am thankful to you. You taught me so much and protected me, after all! So you don’t have to try and impress or flatter me to get me to listen to you. What do you have to say this time?”

“I’m not here to request anything, just to chat for a bit about the day-to-day.”

“The day-to-day?”

“Exactly. Miss, didn’t you used to favor gowns made of Armenia silk? They’ve finally begun to become available in small amounts on the market.”

“Ah...those beautiful gowns! Honestly, I really want one.”

“I thought so too. Well, as long as you flirt with the prince a bit, he would buy it for you. No doubt about it.”

“Heh...is that what you think, Deuban? If I’m going to be honest, I agree with you as well.”

The thought of Edward trying his hardest to get me one of those gowns made me laugh out loud.

“But that’s risky too. That territory is already gathering up so much wealth. If they manage to gather up more...”

“...True. But this is all your fault, Deuban!”

“Oh? How so?”

“It’s all because your plan from before failed that she could even stay within the society of nobles. I even introduced you to the pope and everything. But because you failed, she’s obtained even greater power!”

“It really is my fault. I had your help, yet this is how things turned out...I am truly sorry!”

“Dammit...don’t fail again next time.”

“Yes, Miss...forgive me for speaking my mind, but you really do hate that duke’s daughter.”

“Oh, absolutely. She was born with everything and enjoys it all with a look of entitlement that disgusts me. I was hoping I could see her in a flustered state when she left the Academy...”

I couldn’t help but glance at the window. My own face was reflected there.

“All this time, back when I lived in those streets below I’ve thought the same thing. That isn’t the world I belong in. I’m so cute, I couldn’t just be buried in that sort of place! So I worked hard to get where I am now. I can’t give up until I achieve my goal.”

“How dependable you are.”

“One day, this nation will belong to me. Heh heh, I really look forward to that day!”

Without realizing it, I seemed to have gotten a bit too excited and wasn’t even thinking to control the volume of my voice. Deuban applauded my speech.

“Speaking of which, according to your recommendations, I stopped interacting with Van and he disappeared immediately afterwards...was this really a good idea?”

“Of course. Allowing him to remain by your side is no longer beneficial. It’s only after you chase him off that he’ll do something useful!”

“Fu fu...in that case, I look forward to seeing what happens!”

“Definitely...how has your relationship with the prince been going?”

“Very well. It’s a little embarrassing to talk about, but he really is adorable!”

“Well, well...you won’t fall into the same traps your mother did, right? I’m worried for you.”

His words were like a spray of cold water to the face. My heart became cold. And I was originally in such a good mood too.

“I am different from my mother. I won’t become what she did.”

“That’s good to hear. Well then, my time here is almost up. Please allow me to come by and visit you next time again.”

“Ah, I look forward to seeing you again.”



## Chapter 117: Dean's soliloquy (1)

"...Rudy, I'm finished."

Watching me put down my quill, Rudy smiled softly.

"Thank you for your hard work. I'll send these to the corresponding departments."

"If it's not too much work."

After saying that, I couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief. We finally finished taking care of all the cases we needed to take care of.

Now even if we went to the Armenia territory things would be fine...that's what I couldn't help but think.

"Finally, we could go and visit there without issue."

I wasn't supposed to say it, but he saw right through me.

"Well, I think we're just about done here. All the work that is urgent and important is done. Plus, why are these cases under my jurisdiction anyways? What is the financial office doing?"

"It's because there aren't enough people in the palace."

At the moment, we didn't just have to arrange for spies to prevent political errors in other nations or various territories, but also within our own palace.

It was because all the big players were still duking it out, while underneath them others were trying to gain the upper hand by competing amongst themselves. Of course, if they were using more moral methods of competition then things would be fine. But all of them were cheating, whether through bribing or connections, and anyone who tried to take the high way was treated as an idiot. In this kind of atmosphere, many talented individuals ended up leaving the palace early because they couldn't see a future there.

Although I had hired many of them back to work under me...

"We're also lacking in staff, but the Armenia territory isn't doing so badly. The truly awful situation is over here, where we have people but are powerless to

do anything about anything.”

Everyone drags each other down, and no one ends up getting work done. Under these circumstances, just thinking about how many actual capable civil servants remain makes my head hurt.

“Let’s take a bit of a break. Wake me up in an hour.”

After taking a deep breath, I told Rudy.

“Shall I prepare the bedroom for you?”

“No need.”

“All right.”

After Rudy left, I sighed and closed my eyes. Slowly, I relaxed my consciousness.

Maybe it was because I was so tired...

...I dreamt of some nostalgic memories!

Usually I never dreamed about my childhood memories...it was a pity that they weren’t very happy.

My earliest memory is being surrounded by adults every unchanging day. Being born as the first prince meant that as soon as I was born I was shuttled off to be taken care by a dedicated wetnurse.

...I always felt like I had a rather cool temperament as a child, but that never felt like something bad to me.

People who only wanted to serve me, people who served me for their own good...with so many subjects to observe surrounding me every day, I analyzed their actions and picked out the truths and antagonism in their words. There was no better environment when it came to practicing how to analyze others.

Jealousy, greed, conceit, pride, laziness...depending on what kind of provocation others received, it was easy to guess what kind of negative emotion they would show, how they would react. Everyone treated me as a child, so they would all act exactly as I wanted them to. It was very amusing.

After I told Rudy about this, he only laughed rather helplessly. “Normal three-

year-olds would never do anything like that,” he said.

But after Edward was born, everything became more complicated. Queen Ellia’s power within the palace immediately started to rise, and many of those around me also gathered around her instead.

My mother had already held a lowly position within the palace. After all this, it felt like she barely had any kind of authority to speak of.

...I didn’t really have that many clear memories of my mother.

One reason was that we had never interacted much in the first place.

But the most crucial one was that she passed away so early.

From my current fuzzy memories, I can recall that my mother was weak but strong-willed, quite an extraordinary figure.

She was physically feeble and was gentle, never one to compete for favors. Her innermost nature was completely incompatible with the desire-heavy atmosphere of the palace.

But she remained there, even though she could have used her feebleness as an excuse to move to the palace where the queen dowagers lived.

No, perhaps she couldn’t have. My father had such a stubborn streak when it came to my mother.

Back then I had asked, carelessly, why she stayed.

“Why do you stay here?” “This place doesn’t suit you, Mother.”

At the time I was only worried for her. I wanted her to relax her mind.

After all, every day she faced unimaginable ill will from others.

But thinking of it now, my directness could only have sprinkled more salt into her wounds.

Even so, she had smiled gently in response.

“Because I love him.”

I couldn’t understand it at all. I really wanted to just laugh it off or something.

But I couldn’t.

Her response conjured up a strange sense of respect within me.

In the end, that was all she could get.

The love of a king, deep within the palace...nothing more.

From my mother's perspective, I understood that she really only stayed because of that.

I thought that she was amazing.

It wasn't about being smart, or right. There was something powerful within her.

But at the same time, I couldn't help but blame my father.

While the king is a person, he is also a mechanism, a symbolic mechanism ensures the gigantic existence of a nation continues to move on.

Of course he would have things that he was personally powerless about.

Like being forced to take Ellia as one of his wives, being unable to give my mother thorough protection because of his busyness...

But if this were the case, then he should never have strayed from his role as mechanism in the first place.

Marrying my mother out of his own will was already putting his own feelings first, resulting in negative consequences that my mother ended up having to shoulder alone.

If only he had never fallen in love with her.

Or if she had fallen in love with anyone else.

She would have lived a steady, warm life, with none of the sadness, and none of the dangers. Although it would be mundane, she wouldn't have to smile with such melancholy.

After giving birth to Leticia, my mother's health began to decline significantly.

At the same time, the king's feelings toward my mother only grew stronger.

Of course Queen Ellia was unhappy about that. So she took action to bury my mother once and for all.

Through meetings with other wives, she had grasped relevant methods and talent to put her plan into motion.

I don't know how aware my mother was of this situation, but I'm sure she must have at least felt that something was off.

When the king wasn't around, she would tell me quietly to "take care of Leticia".

...I never turned her down.

Of course it was because we were family. But more importantly, it was because even when she spoke such fragile words, the determination in my mother's eyes still hadn't vanished.

To realize the promise with my mother, I immediately began to act.

I contacted Duke Anderson through Rudy, hoping to meet with the queen dowager, all while eliminating suspicious individuals who lingered around Leticia.

When it came to the day we had agreed upon, I fled the palace and pleaded with my grandmother, whom I was meeting for the first time, to protect Letty. In return, my grandmother would be able to limit my freedom.

As a grandmother, she was genuinely worried for my mother, me, and Letty.

But at the same time, she maintained her role as ruler.

If I stayed in the palace as the first prince, the battle for the throne would only grow more and more fierce. My power would be manipulated by others, and I would be pushed onto a public front at a young age as a puppet rather than by my own will. That was the situation that the queen dowager was most worried about.

But even if we remained under her protection, we could never completely avoid the inevitable battle for the throne.

Even if I gave up my rights to inherit the throne, my royal blood and my identity as first prince would not vanish. That meant Queen Ellia would not spare me.

So I had to store up strength, couldn't let myself go with the flow. I needed to

make my own decisions and be my own protection in solidifying my position.

“The king is the symbol of power, so he can never allow gaps in his plans that others might interfere in. To the greedy nobles, kingship is the ultimate prize. So if any flaws are discovered, they will move in, take advantage of the weakness, and cause harm to the nation...as per our current situation, Edward cannot become king. If he does, the nobles will come to the conclusion that no matter who is first prince, they will be able to affect the next round of selection for the throne. If that thought takes root in their minds, the corruption in the palace will be unstoppable.”

The queen dowager sighed, seeming troubled.

The battle for the throne must be a huge bother for her as well.

“So you must never stop gathering up power and resources to stop the Maeria family from continuing to rise. That is my condition.”

These were more wishes of my own than her conditions.

Considering my situation after protecting Letty, the course of action suggested by my grandmother is the most effective one.

With the possibility of assassins, increasing our strength too aggressively is absolutely too dangerous.

Even if we played dumb the whole time, however, we’d still be exiled for various made-up reasons.

So to be able to ensure our safety with the queen dowager in her territory while learning how to make our own was really the best option.

That was why I didn’t put any more thought into the matter and expressed my agreement right away. Seeing my reaction, the queen dowager narrowed her eyes in what looked like a very satisfied expression.

“I am quite strict, you know.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that.

The moment I arrived here that had been clear to me.

“I will work hard...at least enough to not make my own grandmother want to

abandon me.”

The queen dowager laughed out loud.

It seemed like my sarcasm hadn't made her think less of me.

“You're a smart child...quite amusing too. Well then, work hard and become a person of excellence that I would never think of abandoning.”

Perhaps I should say that she was even encouraging my sarcasm.

“Still, please don't pick on an old lady like me too much, hm?”

Although she said this with a smile and seemed quite excited on the surface... she probably wasn't projecting unreasonably high expectations onto me.

In other words, she was saying, “I see. I do want you as first prince to become king.”

But also that if I grew up to be someone who wasn't qualified to join the battle for the throne, then I should quickly admit my failure. Under those circumstances, even if I managed to take the throne by force somehow, to think that I could solve all the issues within the country was simply ridiculous.

If that ever happened, then the queen dowager would most definitely use her power to crush me, then help the second prince become king.

And then, of course, she would eliminate all the officials responsible for helping us become king, probably planning to weaponize this and take control over the second prince's faction. Eventually she would turn the second prince into a puppet and exercise power from behind the scenes.

“All right, all right, Grandmother. I'll work hard so that you can have a peaceful, eventless old age.”

And then Letty moved to her palace, as did I.

Soon after that, my mother was killed.

Of course the killer was someone under Queen Ellia.

Although I didn't know this until later, my mother's doctor had always been loyal to Queen Ellia.

He must have been the one who slowly poisoned her.

I didn't want to use my youth as an excuse. It could only be because I was so powerless.

Even if I had known that he was loyal to Queen Ellia, I wouldn't have been able to do anything about it. I didn't have the right of speech to change her doctor, nor the ability to ensure that the next one wouldn't also be a puppet for Ellia.

To me at the time, protecting Letty was already exerting all of my effort.

That was the first time I experienced my own powerlessness.

Even when attending my mother's funeral, I had to stay hidden.

After the funeral, the king looked more feeble than before.

But even after seeing him like that, I didn't have any thoughts.

On the other hand, I was more interested in Queen Ellia's crazy antics.

When her dream that when my mother disappeared the king would look at her and only her was shattered by reality...something broke inside of Queen Ellia.

It wasn't much to wonder at. She was just another tragic woman who went mad for a love she could never have.

Of course I would never sympathize with her, but knowing her motivations made the moment a bit more satisfying.

"...Thinking of it now, my favorite wife seemed to have given birth to a princess."

I don't remember which day it was, but that was the first line of the summons that I received from the king.

The fact that he only remembered something like that now filled my chest with rage and blame.

When my mother gave birth, he had never cared for the child.

Hearing this, all the passions that had built up in my chest became cold. My whole body felt strangely numb.

It was the sense of danger that encompassed me, swallowed me up.



If he saw Letty and how much she looked like her mother, he would undoubtedly start spoiling her to fill the hole in his heart that had formed after my mother's death.

If that happened, then Letty would become the next target of Queen Ellia.

Even if she were a princess who had inherited the royal blood, the sight of the king spoiling a girl so similar to her mother would no doubt make Queen Ellia, that pitiable, irrational woman, do something, anything to prevent it.

"Leticia dwells with the queen dowager, who adores her because she looks so much like her father."

Thankfully, after hearing that she looked nothing like her mother, the king lost interest immediately. After that, he never once mentioned seeing Letty again.

## Chapter 118: Dean's soliloquy (2)

Not long after that, we moved from the palace to the queen dowager's palace.

Even so, Queen Ellia kept sending assassins our way.

I didn't have much practice in actual battle, so I kept at training in martial arts. Even Duke Anderson was shocked at how quickly I progressed.

But all of Ellia's actions were truly irritating. I've considered cutting the issue off at the root, but we've never been able to uncover actual evidence of her wrongdoing.

I really have to thank Duke Anderson for his hellish training...sorry, I meant loving lessons. Heh.

At the time, I studied greedily, absorbing all sorts of knowledge and information.

My time living in a contained world passed bit by bit.

Finally, most people on the outside gradually forgot about my existence, and I could start going out proactively once more.

Sometimes it was patrolling various lands, trying to recruit talent.

Sometimes it was attending schools and joining merchants' guilds, all under different names of course.

The queen dowager never challenged me on any of my actions. More accurately, she encouraged me to go out on my own.

And then one day, I met her.

Through introductions made at the guild, I entered the Armenia territory in subterfuge, accepting an errand-running position under an official.

That was where I met Duke Armenia's daughter.

Since I met her, the world around me changed completely. What was once a monochrome world became splendid and colorful.

In this deceitful world where adults all wore shallow, brutish smiles, only she maintained a smile that was pure as a girl's. She was outraged at injustice and shed tears for her own inability to do more.

Originally she seemed like nothing more than an emotional young girl, but she was also more than capable of sticking through hard times and cutting off her emotions to deal with politics.

Every single time she could come up with new innovations that were beyond my imagination, and kept moving forward in the pursuit of her ideals.

Everything about her drew me to her. I couldn't help myself.

Even though I wanted to free her to do everything she wanted, I also wanted to limit her at all costs so that she would never be taken away from me.

Each and every time I needed to keep warning myself.

"Don't forget. In my veins flows the blood of a king."

But Iris wouldn't become like my own mother. After all, Iris's family was elite even among the nobles—Duke Armenia's family.

She herself has undergone a suitable education to her family name.

Even though she had lost an engagement, if she were engaged to the first prince then no one would ever want to mention something like that again.

But that also meant that the person she married would have to be someone of significant status.

If she wanted to get married, her partner could only be the first prince, or from another distant nation.

Like Rudy had said, if I secured an engagement with her, there would be significant benefits for both me and the Armenia family.

But who really wants to put someone they care about in that kind of danger?

Before I can settle my differences with Queen Ellia, forcing Iris into an engagement will only make her another target for my enemies.

Beforehand because of the queen dowager's plots, Iris had attended the reconstruction party and recovered some of her reputation. Because of that,

she was already somewhat of an obstacle for them. They might even want to take action against her directly.

...But more importantly, if I ever brought her to my side, I would probably become no different from the king right now.

I would end up breaking her wings and trap her in the cage that we call a “palace”.

She’ll only be able to look at me. Even though she’ll be trapped, she’ll never be bored.

If that were the case, the free-spirited woman that I loved would vanish completely.

I’m such a contradictory person.

One day, I will emerge onto the political stage as a member of the royal family.

That day is not so far away.

When the day comes, it will also be the time for decisions.

So please...just let me have a bit more time, a bit more time to do what I want!

In the near future, I’ll become that mechanism known as “king”. When that happens, I’ll have to abandon all my human emotions.

So give me more time, until I have to leave her, the person who makes me feel most human.

## Chapter 119: Reunion with Dean

“All right, I’m finally done...”

*Scratch, scratch...*the pen in my hand moved quickly over paper, signing my name on documents.

My work today was finally done.

“Now that all those people who were loitering around at home are back at work, everything is much better. My workload has finally become manageable!”

Although it wasn’t quite decorous, I slumped on the table.

My head felt so heavy.

“You’ve worked hard, milady.”

With a smile on her face, Tanya poured tea for me.

“Excuse me.”

Appearing alongside a knock of the door was Dean.

“Dean!”

Caught off guard, I tried to comb through my hair with one hand.

He kept appearing so suddenly...!

“Long time no see, Miss.”

“Ah, yes. It really has been a long time.”

Since last time I encountered him and Letty?

When I learned that Letty was his sister, I was a bit panicky...perhaps if I thought a bit longer about it, I was shifting blame.

I didn’t have any right to limit him.

When there was no contract, even though we weren’t complete strangers... we were just normal acquaintances.

The times when I was busy, where I might happen to travel...all that stuff, I

almost revealed to him.

Ah, I couldn't keep thinking like that.

Thinking hard back to my rather cold reception of Letty, I almost wanted to burrow into a hole in the ground somewhere.

"I'm very sorry. While you were so busy, I wasn't able to come here and help."

"That's fine. You have a lot to do too."

As I said this, I gestured for him to sit.

Tanya was already preparing tea for him.

And then I started to talk about things that had happened in the territory.

Although some of it was just complaints, Dean's expression showed no impatience. He just kept listening and occasionally nodded in affirmation.

"Then have you been out on the streets since you've been back?"

"Well...no. I've thought about going..."

But I'd never been able to make up my mind.

Even though everyone seemed to understand me...I think?

Every time I thought about it, I kept shrinking back from the prospect.

Mostly it was also the fact that so much work had piled up recently.

"So you want to go out after all?"

I nodded.

"Then I'll also work as hard as I can. As for you, milady, as long as there's any work left, you'll use it as an excuse not to go onto the streets."

"Mmph..."

Even though he said it with a smile, it was exactly what I was thinking.

"All in all, when your work comes to a head, please do go out and talk a stroll on the streets. If you don't, you'll probably feel down as well."

"...that's true."

If I kept running away from doing it, then it would only get harder to ever get up and go. The contradictory mood I'm in would only get worse, and I'd end up dragging it out forever.

"Since we've made a goal now, that means we have to go...Dean, will you help me?"

"Of course."

Dean answered with a smile.

In that case, it was time to do our best.

## Chapter 120: Tanya's work

"Miss Tanya, can we talk?"

It was after I had put all the tea supplies away and was walking down the hallway.

I wasn't sure when Dean had gotten in front of me, but he called out for me.

"What is it?"

After I asked this, Dean glanced around casually, confirming that we were the only ones left there before speaking.

"Do you know Dawson Kataberia (the son of the head of knights)?"

Dean's words made my gaze sharper.

"Of course. What about him?"

"He seems to be lurking around this territory and near your lady. It's unclear what he's trying to snoop around for."

"Where did you hear this?"

"I heard about it coincidentally in the capital. As you know, me and Duke Anderson are related."

"I see."

If it were Master's connections, then this information was more reliable.

No matter what, Master had connections to both the military and the knights' order.

Even so, it wasn't good to come to rash conclusions. Right now it was best to make sure that this news was real. But...

"I understand. But why tell me this?"

This was an important question.

I was just an ordinary servant.

Only a few knew that I was milady's eyes and ears.



“I needed to confirm the veracity of this news immediately. That’s why I wanted to tell you first. Is there anything wrong with that?”

“So why me?”

To my repeated questions, Dean smiled, seeming slightly confused.

“Observing your motions, one might realize that you have some training in martial arts.”

“That...”

“I’ve studied from Duke Anderson, so I can at least determine something like that. Judging from your personality, you would definitely be the type to utilize this power. Am I wrong?”

“...If that’s the case, wouldn’t it be better to tell one of her guards?”

“Oh, are you not a guard? I’m not sure what your position is.”

He had me.

It was true. He had never mentioned my job.

Digging your own grave—I guess that was a phrase for me.

...As if he could read my thoughts, Dean tucked away his smile.

“But back on topic...I’ll say it again. After observing your day-to-day actions, I guessed that you had trained in some kind of martial arts. From how your gaze moves, to how your feet move...it’s not hard to tell. Going down that line of thought, it seems more likely that you’re her eyes and ears than any kind of guard. That’s what I thought.”

“Is...that so...”

Was I too weak, or was the man before me too observant?

“Who are you?”

Whatever he said would not be true.

Even if I were weak, I shouldn’t have been seen through by a man who only knew a bit of martial arts.

Only a man who had the same level of natural talent as Master, who had

trained for at least a decade would be able to tell.

Or perhaps someone who had faced off against someone who was at an equal level to me.

Only then could my observational movements be caught.

Thinking about it like that, the man before me should be the latter.

I couldn't help but ask this.

"How...would a merchant guild's merchant's son bump into a confrontation like that?"

In response to my question, the man before me laughed.

In his eyes was a sliver of a shadow.

"Whatever. Please pass this information onto milady."

I couldn't keep asking this man any personal business.

He hadn't let any clues slip in my conversation with him.

To my response, the man narrowed his eyes, slightly surprised.

"Of course. But shouldn't you verify its truth before you pass it on?"

"I'll do that. But I think that this is something she should know as soon as possible...are you so surprised by my decision?"

"Yes. I thought you wouldn't tell her news that wasn't confirmed so she wouldn't worry."

"...I can't deny that."

If this were the past, I might have done that.

No, it was more likely than not that I would have.

...But...

"Milady stands on her own two feet, walking forward with strength. As someone who serves her, if I slow her down without any important reason, she won't be able to move forward."

When I was talking with milady, I couldn't help but have goosebumps.

I saw for myself her determination.

At the same time, I recalled my conversation with Dida from earlier.

That late night secret meeting.

My function was not protecting milady with silk and cotton, preventing her from getting hurt.

It was following by her side as hands and feet, or ears and eyes.

If I wanted to protect her, I couldn't withhold unconfirmed information or plug my eyes and ears after making a mistake.

That wasn't my job.

It was...

"You're not someone who would harm her, are you?"

The second I asked...the man laughed out loud.

"I'm honored to be acknowledged by you like that, Miss Tanya."

He said.

"I understand. Miss Tanya, the confirmation of this news and other news, I leave to you."

"You don't have to tell me to do anything."

The man turned away. I turned and walked forward to complete my work.

## Chapter 121: City Date

...Should I say that it was inevitable, or indescribable?

After Dean arrived, all work progressed at a breakneck speed.

It felt just like there were two of me.

Work that I'd been keeping piled up was handled, bit by bit.

There were two reasons that I had to work so hard.

One was because I was also dealing with the merchants' guild's work at the same time.

The second was because I was busy handling various tasks related to our territory's politics.

My usual work, plus all this additional work, plus all the other events that had happened, had resulted in such a big buildup of work. Normally it wouldn't get to this degree.

We've been building up the structure and principles of territorial politics. The same went for the guild.

That's why I had to keep the number of paperwork mounds on my table down to two or three.

That aside, thanks to Dean I was able to handle all that work.

All I could say about his skill was that I admired him.

Most officials would see him and think that the devil himself had come...that was what they would mutter to themselves anyway, as if in a trance. Or "If only I could take a vacation..." they would say this, walking past.

Only the financial department's members always made up their minds that "this time we have to beat Mr. Dean".

...Dean, what have you done.

I couldn't help but ask him. "All these people are talented. I can't help but be passionate about it." He would answer me like this, and flash a bright smile.

The speed at which we worked had increased by quite a bit. As for the officials—although they looked quite exhausted, they did their best to keep up with Dean’s pace. I didn’t have to ask twice for anything.

That was also why all our urgent work had been taken care of. Today was the day we were going for a stroll on the street.

Because Tanya started doing my makeup beginning early in the morning, my face gave off a look that could only be described as “Who is this?”

This was more than just makeup. It was basically facial reconstruction!

Other than that I also put on glasses, and changed my hair color with the products of the Azura merchants’ guild.

Finally, I put on a cotton dress.

Even people who knew me probably wouldn’t realize unless I went out of my way to say hello to them. It was that kind of disguise.

“Well then, Dean. Let’s go.”

“Yes, milady.”

“Please be careful along the way.”

Surprisingly, Tanya was not tagging along this time.

It seemed like she had something to look into.

Ryle and Dida were the same. Both of them had left the capital by now.

Dida had gone to the East, while Ryle went to the North.

I was originally going to take several guards with me, but strangely enough Tanya was the one who jumped out to oppose me.

If I had brought guards, no matter what kind of disguise I had put on, there was the possibility that they would realize I was the duke’s daughter.

Minae had said what she had to say, but considering what might happen, it was better that I stay low-key.

Even so, without guards I was honestly a bit unsettled...in the end, the one who was chosen was Dean.

As skilled as Ryle and Dida, and had the benefit of no one on the streets knowing him.

There was no one better to be my guard on this trip.

Tanya didn't oppose it either.

Not only that, I've been hearing words from her that seem to suggest that she's beginning to approve of him.

Really, what had happened to change Tanya's mind?

Recently I'd had the feeling that something had changed about her aura. Was this a consequence of that change?

All in all, Dean and I visited the streets together.

As always, they were bustling, vibrant.

The products on the market were laid out side by side, and the many people who sought them walked along the road.

"Ah..."

I hadn't walked in a crowd for a while so of course I made the elegant move of bumping into someone and almost falling over.

I'm half hikikomori by now...

"Are you okay?"

Dean was the one who grabbed me as I fell.

"Sorry...thanks."

Raising my head in embarrassment, I saw that he was even closer to me than I had thought.

It felt like something was itching inside of me, but also like I was embarrassed or shy.

This light, airy feeling brought heat to my face so that I couldn't help but lower my head.

"There are so many people."

"Yes...it's quite pleasant."

He seems to have understood the real meaning behind the quiet words I spoke. Looking up, I saw a gentle smile on his face.

If there were so many people walking about, it meant that this street was quite well-off.

More importantly, the fact that people could be out and about shopping without concern meant that it was a safe district.

In my past life I lived on the peaceful streets of Japan, so this was nothing new to me. But of course I knew all too well that this wasn't something to be taken for granted.

That was exactly why I felt like a scene like this was a product of my work, and I could begin to be happy.

"...Standing here will block other people out. Let's go."

I had poured too much of myself into admiring this scene.

Thinking a bit harder, Dean was right. We were in the middle of the street.

"Yes, true."

As I was about to start walking, Dean extended a hand.

In that moment I stared at him, completely taken aback.

"There are too many people. I don't want us to lose each other."

Dean smiled as he said this.

That was true. I extended my hand in return, but felt a strange nervousness and ended up having to dress up my true expressions.

After we were holding hands, Dean began to walk immediately.

The hand in mine was bigger, a bit coarse...but also very warm.

The temperature seemed to warm even my heart...and I became very, very happy.

If only this moment could last forever.

That was the thought that was born in a corner of my mind.

We walked like that for a while, inspecting the market, the flowers for longer

than I expected.

Suddenly an alley came up before us. I stopped in my steps.

“Is there something wrong?”

Hearing the concern in Dean’s voice, I smiled back to show that everything was fine.

“This alley...it’s quite similar.”

“Similar?”

“Yes. After I accepted the position of substitute leader, I led a few people to survey the territory. Something happened in a place like this.”

“I heard about it from Dida.”

“Really...as a matter of fact, after seeing a dim alleyway in the east, I wanted to go in. I couldn’t help but be interested.”

“Yes...I assume everyone stopped you.”

“Yes. Especially Dida. He said it was still a bit early for me.”

Now I understood what Dida was trying to say.

No matter how safe an area is, if you leave the main path just a single step, it’ll turn into something completely different. There was a world in the shadows.

It wasn’t because of a slum, or the difference between poverty and richness. It was another kind of darkness.

No matter in terms of atmosphere or order, it was a completely different world from the one on the surface.

In my past life I had encountered something like that too.

It was something that had happened when I was traveling.

With the idea that “this was just a tourist spot”, I was excited to go everywhere and got careless when walking around.

It was in the middle of the city.

But the moment I walked into the alleyway, the atmosphere and everything



else changed.

All the eyes of the people on the street shone with a sharp, hidden light.

There wasn't any change to the town itself, but somehow there was a forced, painful sensation that crushed me.

Instinctively I thought that this place was dangerous.

Despite the fear I felt in that moment...I did the same thing after being reborn. Should I say that I hadn't gotten any better, or was it something else?

All that was irrelevant. In this territory, there were places where the shadows of the city were hidden.

There were organizations that ran this city.

Although I wouldn't call them a necessary evil, they were crucial to maintaining order on the surface.

I didn't think much back then, but it was a good thing I hadn't barged into there. That's a feeling I have deep down.

Unlike in the past, I wasn't traveling. Right now my position and responsibilities were completely different.

Even so, if I had encountered an organization like that, I wouldn't be able to match up against them.

Perhaps I would be consumed.

If I had to act against an organization like that, then I needed to take into consideration how I would reconstruct the order after everything had happened. Making them obey would take a considerable amount of strength.

"I was thinking, if it were the me of today, what would Dida say..."

"What would he say? Even if he saw that you had reached a certain level, he would give you the same response...it's because he's been there before that he doesn't want you to get involved."

"Do you...know?"

"Yes. When we were training under Duke Anderson together, I heard about some of it."

“...Is that so. What did you think after hearing it?”

“There isn’t much special about it. It’s nothing unusual.”

“I’m quite concerned to hear that. What counts as unusual for someone like you?”

Dean smiled.

“Well...that’s why Dida’s ability to sense danger was so acute. I can understand that. He must have started training from a young age. What do you think, milady?”

“I don’t think much of it either. No matter what happened in the past, he never let me see that side of him. Compared to a past that I never got to witness or spend with him, the past that we have shared is more important. Most importantly, he’s an essential part of my family.”

“Your emotions are anything but simple.”

“Is that what you think?...We’ve been spending our time on strange things. It’s about time to go.”

“Yes.”

Just like that, we started to walk again.

We initially walked to the man who ran the diner.

Although I was very nervous, he didn’t notice me at all.

I shuddered in awe at Tanya’s scary makeup skills. After I told him my name, the man was stunned at first...and then he was happy that I had come to visit.

He was so happy that he raised his voice and announced that all the drinks of the people in the diner were on him. His wife glared at him.

But even she welcomed me with tears.

In the end, she gave us a discount on food.

We spent some lively, happy time there.

It was the same at the flower shop and the fish store.

I waved at all the people who knew Alice.

No one was about to hurl insults at me. Everyone cried as they confessed their apologies.

I couldn't help but let my tears flow as well.

"Quite loved."

Dean commented on the way back.

...I was happy.

I felt that, from the bottom of my heart.

In my past life I had also given up most of my time to work.

But what did I get from that?

As time passed, my relationship with others only weakened.

I had no time to use it, so I saved all my money up.

Somehow, my heart could only beat when I was immersed in the fiction of games.

Lonely yet free.

A world of my own was happy, but also hollow.

Right now I gave up all my time to work as well.

Even so, I...was so happy.

My heart would tremble because of someone's laughter, someone's words.

Was it because my point of view had changed? I felt that it wasn't so.

It was because I had changed.

Well, it's natural that I would change. I had combined into another self.

But more importantly, I experienced so many different things.

I immersed myself within them without reservation.

If this was the path I had ahead of me...I thank god for a rebirth opportunity like this.

Suddenly, I looked up at Dean.

Dean sensed my gaze and smiled at me.

Without thinking, I smiled back.

## Chapter 122: Report

“...Miss. Dawson has entered Armenia area.”

I let out a sigh, hearing Tanya’s report at night.

I was flustered when I heard from Dean but I am calm now thanks to that.

“Monitor him. And stop him immediately if he tries to do something funny.”

“Understood.”

“What does he want, now after all this time...?”

If I were to be honest, I wanted to capture him at once and send him back to his home.

“What about his work?”

“It seems he has taken days off from work.”

“To let that person move on his own... what is Dolna thinking?”

“Wasn’t stopping the Chivalric Order’s Knight also a bad outcome for him? That appears to be everything to him. It is good to be prideful and all but go too far and that’s just arrogance. As there is only one man there, if they were to disinherit, they would have to choose someone from their relatives. Did they perhaps think of it as their last chance before that?”

“So very kind of them...”

I ended up snickering unintentionally.

“Well, it’s fine. I won’t forgive anything selfish.”

I clenched my fists with determination.

“Oh, right, what happened today?”

“Eh?! What do you mean by what happened?”

The sudden change in topic took me off guard.

“What...? I was talking about the thing in the city...”

“Ah... the city, yes...”

I might have just been too weirdly over the top with my reactions.

Well, leaving that aside.

“I thought it was very good.”

Nothing else comes up in my mind.

That was all.

“Is that so?”

Tanya also smiled happily.

“That reminds me-”

A thought came to my mind upon hearing the word ‘city’, and so I thought of speaking about it.

“Say, for instance, that you have made a big blunder. And it’s something which can’t be undone. If you encounter a similar situation again, what would you do?”

“That’s a difficult question.”

Tanya raised her eyebrows, looking troubled.

“Would I fail again for sure if I encounter such a situation?”

“Who knows. I don’t know about that. But, you have failed such a situation once and have gone through the experience.”

“I will try again... I guess I can’t say that, huh?”

Saying that, Tanya closed her eyes.

Looks like she is thinking it through seriously.

After a while, Tanya assembled her thoughts and answered,

“If it were me... I would think about the things to gain and things I might lose beyond that situation.”

“I am sure, if it were something very trivial, I would think of avoiding it without hesitation. If I end up hesitating, then it would surely be because of a

desire I can't cast away which would lie beyond that hard situation. Therefore, I think I would compare the two sides. What I would lose and what I would gain. About the things I will lose if I avoid the situation, the things I have now which I don't want to lose."

"A desire you can't cast away..."

"Yes, only speaking hypothetically considering my situation. I don't quite know your intention behind the question but... Milady, if, you were to encounter such a situation, I would follow the decision you come to to the bitter end. Everyone else also thinks the same. Even if their methods are different, we are all the same in wanting to support you. If you reach the limits of your thoughts, please think of us. And, please use us.... Was such an answer alright?"

"Yes, it was more than enough. Thank you... I am tired, I will be going to bed now."

"Understood."

## Chapter 123: Iris's monologue

After Tanya prepared my bed for me, I lay down for a bit.

And then after she left, I went to the balcony.

Although it was a bit unseemly, it should be fine at night...at least that's what I told myself.

I gazed at the night sky, and looked at the street.

It was quite dark. I couldn't make much out.

It was the darkness of a world without electricity.

But even that kind of darkness made me happy.

"...a wish that I can't abandon, hm? Like an idiot..."

I clenched my jaw...but still I couldn't hold back the ugly tears. It was only because I didn't have to worry about being seen by others that I could allow an expression like that onto my face.

My whispers echoed, then dissipated in the darkness.

More and more tears flowed down my face.

With the tears came the sobs that I tried my hardest to hold back.

...I wasn't ignoring what Tanya said.

It was actually the opposite.

Tanya's words were a signal to me.

Sleeping deep within my heart was....a wish that I couldn't abandon.

I was the idiot.

I had encountered painful, awful experiences, and the emotions that should have been locked away spilled out so easily.

How fragile.

I had realized it. Even though I pretended I hadn't.



I made up excuses, even lied to my own heart.

If I could just face myself, it would be easy.

Why did I rely on him, flirt with him?

Who did I reveal my pains and my emotions to?

Why did I get so deep into the trenches of ugly jealousy?

It was because even though my heart understood everything, my mind had stopped thinking.

But I...could not fail any more.

What I might lose was of too much importance.

The people following me, my territory. And the people who lived on this land.

Facing all of this, I felt that I was turning back into the idiotic self of my past. Thinking about the desperation of being betrayed...made me so scared.

I don't want that.

Uncertain things that I couldn't confirm with my eyes, things that I was powerless against—why would I chase after them like this?

Although I was so afraid, there was also an intense emotion in my heart, waiting to erupt.

"I like..."

Trying to say it made my heart drop to the ground with a thud.

I hadn't said that in front of him.

Because my yearning would never come true.

A love that went past identities, a story that was more like a dream.

Cinderella was also a noble.

Yuri was also a duke's daughter.

That's why I didn't tell him.

...I couldn't throw away all that was so important to me.

So I hid my true feelings again.

And then, looked away.

Tomorrow, my smile would be the same as always.

## Chapter 124: Dawson's journey

"Don't ask me something like that. I haven't met her, let alone talk to her."

This was what one of my seniors in the knights' corp told me.

The moment I heard those words, an invisible blade seemed to pierce through my chest.

As to why, before I had spoken up against Duke Armenia's daughter, I had met her but almost never spoken.

"...Dawson. To lash out against a woman like that, to disturb her life and join others in belittling her...as a knight, can you really claim that you were correct?"

That was something Mother said to me once.

That and what my senior said to me kept ringing through my head.

...Perhaps I was wrong.

Finally, that was the thought that came to my mind.

When I thought about what she had done to Yuri, I couldn't help but flare up in anger, but even so...what I had done to her was still unjustified.

Although I could be proud as a man, as a knight—

So I wanted to bring an end to the affair. I challenged her guard.

"...The relationship between us isn't so shallow that you can hope to clear it up just like this."

My considerations were revealed quite easily. Not only that, but I earned myself such a judgemental final word.

It happened at the training session...well, actually, it happened several days after I had tried my skill.

"Why did you do something like that?"

That's what my senior said. The string of memories came to my mind.

Everyone around me kept chattering, on and on, without end.

The time that I wasn't working coincided with that of my senior's. That's how I was brought out to a hotel on the streets.

It housed the kind of bar that you could find anywhere on the market.

I hadn't come to the bar itself, but because Duke Anderson liked interesting, fresh things, I had hung around the hotel itself several times.

"It was because I wanted to bring an end to things."

I told him all the memories that had come to my mind as well as my own thoughts.

After I said that, he took a deep breath.

"You really are an idiot."

His words made me angry. I couldn't help but furrow my brow in frustration.

Seeing my reaction, he flashed a resigned smile.

"I have to ask you. What do you think Lady Iris would think if she heard something along the lines of 'I don't think I was wrong, but I treated you wrongly'?"

"That..."

"So you wanted to bring an end to things, and you challenged her guard? Anyone would wonder what the hell you were trying to do!"

"I tried to ask for forgiveness more directly. But I couldn't even get a chance to see her..."

"That's true. If you mention wanting to meet, she'll of course think you're up to something and be on her guard against you. Plus, your apology will only be shallow. Compared to that, you should spare your time for more interesting things."

"It's not just a shallow thought of mine. I had repented. As a knight, it's not something I should have done."

"Yes, yes. From earlier I've been asking this of you. If you were in her shoes, if you had been shamed like that, what would you think?"

Hearing him ask me that, I was speechless.

“I don’t think I was wrong, but I treated you wrongly.” If she heard me say that, what would she think?

Each time I thought of Yuri, I felt that the whole thing was unforgivable.

An apology for the sake of apologizing was hollow.

“See, isn’t it shallow? There’s no heart to it. If you apologize like that, the receiving party will see that everything that’s coming out of your mouth sounds pretty but means nothing. Plus, for the person apologizing, maybe you’ll be able to move on quickly...but the one wronged can’t do the same. As to why...well, apologies are a chance for the wronged to give the other side another chance, a chance to start over.”

His expression was extremely serious.

“Because of your own willful ideas, you want to give her more pain. That’s what her guards were trying to tell you. That’s what I think.”

“...The relationship between us isn’t so shallow that you can hope to clear it up just like this.”

Is that what he wanted to say?

But my senior’s words overlapped with his.

From his point of view, my apology might seem incredibly ridiculous.

Don’t think that you can be forgiven so easily.

Don’t think that you can just brush things aside like that.

“...What should I do?”

“Don’t ask me. What do you want to do?”

Saying this, he threw his head back, finishing all of his beer.

“I said this just now. If you apologize like that, you’ll only be thinking of bringing things to an end for yourself. You’re saying sorry, I didn’t want to do any of it, I just followed the crowd. But you were the one who made your own decisions. Think about it from a deeper, wider angle. What should you do, what can you do.”

We drank for a bit longer before parting ways.

After arriving home, I kept recalling his words.

Everything that had happened up to now, and everything that might happen in the future.

I thought for a long time, but couldn't come up with anything.

...What have I done. What do I want to do?

I kept thinking, kept turning it over in my mind. Finally...

"...I want to understand her."

That's the conclusion I came to.

I don't understand her. In that case, the best I can do is try to understand.

Understand what she's done, what she wants to do.

Just like that, I obtained permission to take leave. I began to travel.

I started on my journey to understand her.

## Chapter 125: Dark clouds

“...The numbers are strange. Compared to what they were in the past, imports and exports have decreased.”

Staring at the file, I pointed out the parts that bothered me.

“Why is that...it’s not commonly used products, but imports that were referred to as luxury items. What’s more, the decrease is only in the east.”

“...You saw the patterns.”

One of the members of the financial division spoke up, eyes wide.

“Although it’s a bit embarrassing, I didn’t realize it at all before Dean pointed it out.”

Hearing him say so, I couldn’t help but smile in exasperation.

“What did you think? Would I have realized it on my own, or did you think that I wouldn’t?”

“Are you testing me?”

“I don’t know. I was just a bit curious as to how my subordinates viewed me. Back on topic. If it was Dean who realized, then there should be a report on this completed already. How has that gone?”

“There isn’t a report yet. Dean is looking for a reason as well, and is sending people to the east. He said if it were you, you would definitely notice things like these. And he told us to hand you the documents while he was gone.”

“Ah! Then I’m being tested by Dean.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Not at all. Isn’t this interesting...what could the reason be? I’ve looked at the other information we have currently. It’s not a decrease in population, or a decrease in the desire for consumption among the population. The prices have even went up a bit. None of the other regions have seen this change...is someone manipulating this from behind the scene?”

I said this as I flipped through all the other documents in the room.

While I looked through them, the waiting official observed me in silence.

“Call Sebastian over for me. Thank you for your report.”

I gave Tanya an order, and dismissed the officials.

When Sebastian came, I immediately issued an order to him.

I wanted him to bring me all the reports from the Eastern region.

There were docks in the east.

Historically, they’ve always been an affluent area.

Since I became substitute leader, I expanded the dock and reorganized things, putting a lot of effort into our interaction with other countries.

It was an important area for income...so I took it perhaps a bit too seriously.

If I couldn’t figure out the reason behind this change, I wouldn’t be able to relax.

Although only a portion of products were affected, there was no promise that it wouldn’t eventually spread to everything else.

“Dean, I’ve received a report already. How have things been going?”

I said, as Dean walked in after a quick knock on the door.

“Honestly, with our current situation, there hasn’t been any progress made. What remains is for us to wait for the reports of those who have been sent to the east. Still, something bothers me...”

“You say that no progress has been made. Is there nothing odd other than the numbers for the region?”

“Yes. It’s too quiet. Even when they receive reports of accidents on the shore, no merchant guilds have gotten out of hand. Speaking of which, when it comes to a decrease in imports and exports, the guild hasn’t raised any opinions or talks. They’re the ones affected, but haven’t spoken up about anything. That alone is quite amazing.”



## Chapter 126: Tanya's concerns

"Hold on, Tanya."

It was the middle of the night. I was about to leave, but was called to a stop.

"What is it, Dida? I'm busy."

I glared at him, but Dida maintained his usual casual smile.

"I know. You received an order from milady to investigate the east region, correct? And you also have to look after young master. You're working quite hard."

"If you think so, then perhaps it would be a good time to leave now."

"That's unnecessary."

"...What?"

"I'll be the one investigating. If you're buying a biscuit, you should go to the biscuit store. I'll go back to the old nest."

Hearing this, I understood what he wanted.

The man before me was from the east region...besides that, he was once a member of that organization.

Lady Iris picked him up when she was traveling with her family in the east.

It wasn't far from the capital of the territory, plus it was by the sea. So the east region was a frequent destination for their travels.

That was also when I was working and practicing...so I didn't go with her, but instead waited for her at home. Seeing this man come back with her, I was more than surprised.

"Don't you have your own work?"

"I also have quite the excellent partner. Plus, all of our subordinates are well-trained. Everything will be fine."

"...Even so, you can't do this. You're the kind of person who wouldn't utilize the organization's power and look into things on your own. But even if it was

from when you were young, they'll still remember your face...it's dangerous."

"Hey, come on. I for one think that I have a few good moves up my sleeve."

"I know. You don't have to tell me that. But why? Why do you want to do this?"

"If we're going to put ourselves out there for Lady Iris, I should be the one to do it. As I mentioned, I understand the landscape there better."

As if to demand his true intentions, I stared straight at him.

He smiled, seeming a bit confused...but eventually, his expression became serious.

"I keep having a bad feeling about the whole situation. So I wanted to go ahead and confirm things for myself. If I can clear the slate, then I'll do that too."

"Do you think that I'll let you go alone after hearing that?"

"I've said it before. I can handle pretty dangerous situations...so, sorry about this."

The moment he said that...something hit me.

I had been careless. I couldn't help but scold myself.

At the same time, my consciousness began to dissipate.

The last thing I saw was him.

His expression was incredibly apologetic.

...When I opened my eyes again, my brain couldn't process what was going on.

Why? The scene that entered my eyes was so completely normal.

It was my room.

But it wasn't a dream.

Looking down at the clothes I was wearing, I sunk into thought.

I immediately tidied myself up and ran out of the room to report to milady.

“...Dida has gone to investigate?”

The moment I spoke, her eyes went big.

“Although I understand that I shouldn’t worry about him...I still do. Would he do something careless?”

She spoke her thoughts out loud.

“Even so, if we were to bring him back, Ryle...We don’t have the kind of resources to send out someone so skilled. Most importantly, I’m quite grateful for his actions. We’ll see how things go.”

“...I understand.”

I couldn’t go against milady’s decision.

Pushing down the annoying foreboding feeling that kept appearing in my heart, I returned to my usual duties.

## Chapter 127: Dawson's Journey | Part 1

We finally arrived at Duke Armenia's land.

Seeing the streets as busy as they were in the capital, I couldn't help but be stunned.

No...I should say that I've been shocked since I stepped foot in this territory.

The long line in front of customs was already surprising enough. Seeing the tidy streets after entering was likewise surprising.

Especially the latter.

In other territories, even if a leader were planning to clean up some streets, only the main ones would actually be tidied up.

Perhaps it was because of how many police stations there were, each with a constant supply of guards from the duke's family, that the city was also quite safe and peaceful.

I admired it thoroughly. No wonder their family kept producing government officials.

When we arrived in our hotel, the first thing I wanted to do was get up and start strolling through the streets.

Suddenly, I noticed several people walking into a huge building.

"What store is that?"

I asked a man who was walking by.

"Store...? Are you a traveler?"

"Yes..."

"That's the grade school division of the territory's school. It provides free lessons in writing, calligraphy, and mathematics to all the children of the territory."

"Wow...that's quite impressive."

Although it was impressive, was it really necessary?

I wondered this to myself.

Reading, writing, mathematics, were subjects for nobles and merchants.

But if even the commonfolk pursued that kind of knowledge, then what kind of meaning would it have?

“Exactly! It’s something that was put into effect since Lady Iris became substitute leader...she said that knowledge is power, and will become a way to support us to make a living independently. At the beginning I wasn’t even sure what she was talking about, but when you actually start learning, the words really hold a lot of deep meaning. We’ll be able to do more work, and be able to use those skills in life as well.”

This man, seemingly excited by my apparent admiration, began to talk enthusiastically

“Yes. Since she came into power, more hospitals have popped up and the tax policies have been revised. For people like us, life has become much easier.”

For a duke’s daughter to be doing the job of a leader...unimaginable.

“Are you also a student of the academy?”

“Yes. At the moment I’m about to enter the higher level division to study.”

The man’s response was very polite. I also asked around for other opinions.

Even with all the people I asked, no one seemed opposed to the idea of a woman being on top. As a matter of fact, their attitudes seemed more along the lines of “isn’t that how it should be?”

Most of them reacted positively, and many talked about it with as much enthusiasm as the man just now.

Lady Iris seemed to be quite beloved by the people of this land.

Because of all the positivity, the dark emotions in my own heart started to boil.

Although they spoke of her as a saint, she still bullied Yuri like that.

If she were a person like this, why would she do that?

“...Sir, I understand what she’s done for the people. But why is it that

everyone loves her so much?”

Hearing all the people praise her, I couldn't help but ask the man who ran the cafeteria for his opinion.

“What a strange question. She acts out of consideration for us. Why would we hate her?”

“But I heard in the capital that she bullied the next queen in line and was rejected from the Academy. Would a person like that really push policies for the people? Isn't this something she would make her subordinates do?”

Hearing me ask this, the man laughed.

“There must be some kind of mistake in there. Just like the whole business with the church, there must be someone trying to frame her. Thankfully she ended up becoming our leader, so it was a lucky break for us.”

“How can you trust her so deeply?”

“No matter what you say, I've been watching her every action. She works herself to the bone providing for her territory, makes time during work to visit orphanages and survey the streets. No one else thinks of us and acts on our behalf like she does.”

“But...”

“I should ask you, kiddo. Have you heard things about Lady Iris?...If I were you, I'd mind the way you speak. All the people here have nothing but respect for her. In fact, there are some other customers glaring at you right now for what you've said.”

It was true that as he spoke to the owner of the shop, he had felt several eyes on him.

They weren't friendly by any means, but were sharp, hostile.

“...I misspoke.”

“Hm. Take care.”

With that, the man returned to his own work.

...She was beloved by the people of this land.

In other words, since returning from the Academy, she repented and changed herself.

After I paid for the bill, I left the cafeteria.

The sun had already begun to sink below the horizon, but the streets were still bustling. That meant that the streets here were safe.

She who carries this town, these people in her heart...could she really have bullied Yuri?

Gazing out onto the town, I couldn't help but suddenly doubt myself.

But quickly enough, I vanquished that thought.

...Because that meant that I was doubting Yuri.

Yuri wouldn't lie. Couldn't lie.

It must have been that she changed herself.

If this is what happened, then everything that happened at the Academy wasn't so bad after all.

After returning to the hostel, I sipped beer as I looked out of the window at the territory.

...Why did I really come here?

It was to understand her.

...So what did I plan to do after understanding her?

Now that I thought about it, I didn't even know what I was thinking.

Did I want to bring this whole business to an end?

Why would I want to do that...thinking about it, I was just going along with the flow of events.

I had been scolded by my parents. I wanted to eliminate my animosity toward her, who was so admired by the queen dowager.

It was just an attempt to preserve my own reputation.

I had already apologized, already brought things to an end in an attempt to win a way out of everything that burdened me down.

*I said this just now. If you apologize like that, you'll only be thinking of bringing things to an end for yourself. You're saying sorry, I didn't want to do any of it, I just followed the crowd. But you were the one who made your own decisions. Think about it from a deeper, wider angle. What should you do, what can you do.*

What my senior had said came back to me.

It was true.

The person I wanted to apologize to...

Everything about her, there was nothing that...

None of those thoughts were really my own.

Whether it was apologizing...

...Or bringing things to an end.

...Suddenly, I released a breath and looked toward the window.

Looking at my glass, I realized that there was no more beer left.



## Chapter 128: Dawson's Journey | Part 2

I wanted another beer, so I walked downstairs to order one.

The first floor was a restaurant. In this town, this probably counted as a mid-class hostel.

All the other hotels were full, and this one was as well. My room had been the last empty one.

Because of that, the restaurant area was full of people.

"Hey, kid. Are you traveling alone?"

Just as I was ordering another beer, a man spoke from behind.

"Yes, I am."

"Are you here to replenish your stock ?...You don't look like a merchant. Is there anyone around here that you know?"

"Who knows. What about you?"

"Me? I'm here to stock up. But..."

"...Have you encountered any issues?"

"The merchandise I was looking for is gone. I wanted to buy some foreign products from the east, but there seems to have been some kind of conflict there."

"Conflict?"

"Yes. The Boltique mafia is causing trouble. Going to the east right now would be quite dangerous."

"Are the people on top doing anything about that?"

"I believe that the duke sent out some guards to deal with it, so hopefully things will calm down before long."

"Oh...is that how strong the guards are?"

"Yes. Even the knight's order probably shouldn't underestimate their

strength.”

“...What?”

“Don’t glare at me like that, it was just a hypothesis...Kid, are you related to the knight’s order somehow?”

“No, sorry. I just look up to them a great deal.”

I seemed to have been glaring at the man before me without realizing it.

With my hand I rubbed my brow, trying to smooth out the crease.

“I see. In that case, sorry. How about seeing for yourself? Someone like you who looks up to the knight’s order would probably be able to learn something from the experience. You look quite strong yourself, so there shouldn’t be much to worry about.”

“...So Dida’s gone as well.”

I murmured to myself.

The man tilted his head as he stared at me. He seemed not to have caught what I said.

“No, it’s nothing. Is the east well-known in this territory?”

“Of course. It’s the main area for trade in this area. Rumor has it that it was the first place Lady Iris went after inheriting her current position.”

“Oh?”

“There are also several popular tourist spots in this territory. If you’re here to see the sights, I’d suggest you visit not just the capital, but also the east and the south areas. That way you’ll understand Lady Iris’s accomplishments.”

“...Is that so? Thank you for the information.”

After that, I returned to my room, mulling over what to do next.

“...The east, huh.”

I’d make a few more rounds in the capital...and then follow in her footsteps in visiting locations.

These are the thoughts that ran through my mind as I finished the second

beer and went to bed.

## Chapter 129: Departing again

“...Have you received any news from Dida?”

It had been two weeks since Dida had departed, but we hadn't heard from him at all.

As time passed, we couldn't help but begin to worry.

“No.”

“Well, then. How about the other research teams?”

“The safety on the streets seems to have gotten worse. To this day no report has come in, probably because local residents are afraid of the Boltique family. There's also the possibility that they've formed some kind of mutually beneficial partnership with officials.”

“I see...what does the Boltique family want? Do they want to stand against me...no, against Duke Armenia's family?”

“I don't think that's likely. For an organization like this that has been powerful since long ago, there's no reason for them to suddenly start acting up.”

“That's also true...then the only thing I can think of is that someone is acting out under the name of the Boltique family.”

“Milady, there's more news to report.”

“What is it?”

“Dawson seems to be moving toward the east.”

“...Huh?”

“This morning he left from the capital. I thought that he was going back to the capital, but he seems intent on heading east. Could he be headed to the eastern region?”

“Why would he do that now? I thought he came here to speak to me.”

“I don't understand it at all. Here's a list of the people he has interacted with since arriving here.”

Picking up the document provided to me by Tanya, I began to read.

None of them seemed particularly suspicious.

Even so...

"Look into this merchant's whereabouts. Also, increase surveillance of Van."

"Van...huh?"

"Yes. If he's heading toward the east at this moment in time, there's a lot he could do. Although it's also possible that other nobles were involved, this seems too early for it to have been them. In terms of territory, he seems most suspicious. If there's time left over, it's best that you look into other nobles as well."

That was when there was a knock at the door.

Walking into the room...was Dean.

"Dean, perfect timing."

"Sorry. I had some of my own matters to attend to, so I was late."

I told him the situation.

As I spoke, the expression on his face became serious.

"When I left you, I heard an uncertain rumor. That was that one of your aides is actually a member of a fallen family, and is secretly funneling away money from citizens. That's why an individual who had trained in the knight's order began acting to correct your supposed wrongdoing. That could be what this is about."

"...Where did the rumor come from?"

"We're currently looking into it. I'm guessing that it was probably some noble who started it...but it spread among local citizens. It's quite unbelievable."

"I see..."

"Milady, Dida..."

Tanya seemed to want to say something, but stopped herself.

"I trust Dida. No, I want to trust him. At the moment, I'm just worried. Even

so, I want to resolve this before a small conflict turns into a big one.”

I thought about it for a bit. Then I had Tanya call Sebastian to me.

“What is it, milady?”

“Sebastian, I’ll be away from here for the next week or so. I hope that you can manage territorial business while I’m gone.”

“I understand. I’ll work my hardest.”

Hearing my command, he furrowed his brow as if to say something, but let his head drop instead.

“Milady, could this be...?”

“Precisely. I plan to travel to the east. Thankfully there isn’t much work piled up at the moment. If you’re the one managing things, it should all be fine... Because of all my work, I’ve exhausted my body and am currently resting, so all responsibilities go to you. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Yes. I’ll inform all that you remain within the walls of this mansion.”

“But why do you want to go to the east?”

“First of all, I want to take this time to go to the village offices in the east. I think that my position should be useful. Most importantly, I want to confirm things with my own eyes. Second, if possible I want to gain the whereabouts of the Boltique family. Finally, there’s how to deal with the young man from the knight’s order. My plan is to distract him while we’re in contact and resolve things that way...As for who’s coming with me, Dean and Ryle should do for now. Tanya, after you confirm additional surveillance for Van, you can come as well.”

“Understood.”

Dean and Tanya both bowed their heads at the same time.

“All right, then, Dean. Go and call Ryle. We’ll prepare ourselves and depart shortly.”

## Chapter 130: Infiltration and investigation | Part 1

After that, I started to investigate the east. Not by carriage, but by horse. It was faster, after all.

I don't know if it was because of how much of a rush I was in when heading to the capital or just because I had grown used to it, this time my behind didn't ache nearly as much.

Needless to say, I had disguised myself with Tanya's skills. Even the people in the city didn't recognize me initially.

Other than that, Ryle had also disguised himself.

Even though we really couldn't put makeup on him, we still changed his hair color, put glasses on him, and made him take off the armor that he wears all the time.

Not counting the resting time when we changed horses, it would be less than a day before we reached the biggest city in the east.

Anyways, we needed to get there as soon as possible. If we set out before the sun rose, we'd be able to get there before sundown.

Because we didn't know how long we could stay here, we needed to act quick. Ryle and I figured out first where we were going to be staying, and then went to check on the situation of the city's offices.

At the same time, I had Dean go around the city to obtain information.

"Just from looking around, there doesn't seem to be much difference from the past...but I don't know why, somehow it has this heavy atmosphere?"

Just as in the past, what we saw first was the energetic people and the bright streets.

Yet somehow the air felt heavy.

"Yes, it feels like there's a line of vision watching us, piercing through us like needles. Hostility...no, someone is watching us from somewhere."

Ryle's expression was quite fearful as he said this. Perhaps it was because of

how alert he was toward everything around us.

Trying our best to ignore the eyes that were “piercing through us like needles”, Ryle and I walked into one of the relatively larger offices of the city.

From the entrance we could see the window. This was where discussions and procedures of the city were carried out. It was the same kind of structure as it would have been in any other city.

Many local residents were coming in. The employees of the office were walking to and fro frantically.

“...Is anything wrong?”

Just as I was about to try and figure out what was going on inside, a woman spoke to me.

“Me and my sister are considering moving here. The folks at the merchants’ guild said that this was the best place to come to confirm our paperwork.”

Ryle walked between us and told her this.

“I understand. I’ll call you two when it’s your turn. Please come here and take a wooden plaque.”

She brought us to several seats and we sat down. It’s worth saying that we had decided our “situation” before coming here: that we were planning to come here and settle down.

“Sorry for the wait. Please sit down over there. I’ll be the one serving you two today.”

The woman from earlier came out. It seemed like she would be the one answering our questions.

First off, she asked us a few things. Ryle answered her with the responses we had come up with beforehand.

Her answers to our questions were like a guidebook, clear and straightforward. Of course this was meaningful, as answering us like that left quite the good impression.

“Well, then, do you folks have any final questions?”



“On our way here, we heard some rumors,” said Ryle. “It seems like the streets here aren’t as safe as they used to be. Is there any truth behind that?”

“That...”

The woman seemed to have something she couldn’t quite say. Her expression turned awkward for a moment.

“No, as a matter of fact...although it’s embarrassing for the city, it’s the truth. What you might call unlawful individuals and their organizations seem to have gotten into some kind of conflict that affected the city.”

“Is that so...”

“Even so, please don’t worry about it. Just as you know, Duke Armenia has sent out trained guards to various lands. As for all this, we’ve already reported it to them. Before long things should calm down.”

“Oh...so the offices have reported this to the guards,” Ryle said.

“Yes, a while ago. The people on that side said that they were busy at the moment and couldn’t leave right away, but they should be here to handle things shortly.”

“If that’s the case, then I’m not worried anymore. Thank you again,” said Ryle. After that, we returned to the place we were staying.

“...So now that we’ve understood the basic standard of performance for base-level workers and heard that they have reported things to the guard, I guess we could say it’s been a fruitful day. But...Ryle, do you understand what’s going on?”

“No, not at all. A case of this size should be reported to me. But...”

“Which means that the guards stationed here didn’t report it. If the current situation were made public, even without the help of the office, the guards should’ve reported this to you on their own.”

“I don’t want to suspect internal people, but...tomorrow I’ll visit the guards stationed here.”

“All right. After that we’ll have to wait on Dean’s report.”

“Milady, I’m back late.”

Tanya walked in as we were speaking.

“Perfect timing, Tanya. How are things on your side?”

“Of course.”

“Good. Tanya, right now is there any more possibility to change my outward appearance?”

“I had guessed that you would ask. I brought the wig you used in the past. On top of that, I’ll be able to do any kind of makeup for any kind of look you want.”

“That’s good. According to what we’ve decided, we’re going to infiltrate the office tomorrow.”

“Understood.”

“...What is it, Dean?”

“Although I can’t report anything for certain yet...I feel that something is wrong.”

“Wrong? How so?”

“On the streets I’ve heard rumors of the Boltique family, and seen the people who are actually causing trouble on the streets...the impression they give are very different.”

“You saw them? The people causing all the trouble?”

“Yes. They’re just as terrible as expected.”

“What on earth did they actually do?”

“They’re stifling commodities...imports. Some merchant guilds run the businesses behind those specific products. These people say that they’ll invest all while demanding a higher price from the guilds.”

“I see...so that’s what’s going on. If under these circumstances us leaders didn’t act, the people would begin to mistrust us. If paired with rumors, the people of the east would think that we were stripping them of their rights. That’s exactly the kind of opportunity these people are aiming to take advantage of.”

“Yes.”

“Rather than saying they planned out the whole riot from the beginning, it’s probably more likely that they used the riot that was already happening as fodder against us. That’s what I think. If Dawson ran into the place that Dida and those people are in, it’ll be a loss for us no matter what.”

“Exactly. It’s best if we share information with Tanya, and then have her hurry to find where Dida is hiding.”

“I agree. Tanya, can you do that?”

“Yes, milady.”

“Well, then, Dean. According to plan, you and I are going to the office tomorrow.”

“Understood.”

Just like that, our first day in the east ended.

## Chapter 131: Infiltration and investigation | Part 2

The next day, Dean and I infiltrated the local office.

As a matter of fact, the officials-in-training of the capital had been helping out with official duties. But because the main streets were the one that students flocked to, those were the only ones that they were assigned to when working.

In the situation that there weren't enough officials, we wanted students to realize that they could work in the capital as well as at various offices throughout the territory in the future, and so that they could gain work experience early on.

So we decided to infiltrate as students.

Of course we'd arranged this beforehand with the people at the academy.

To spare their concern that we were taking valuable opportunities away from students, I promised that as I was dealing with this, I'd do my very best.

My getup today was also completely different from yesterday's.

Today I wore glasses, and had dyed my hair so dark blue that it was almost black.

Because there were quite a few people on the streets with black hair, I didn't look out of place.

Every hair color was represented here. It looked like quite the fantasy world.

Honestly in a seaside city like this, there were quite a few foreigners who hung around for the sake of trade. Because of that, there was a great diversity of appearances and traits.

Me and Dean once again entered the doors of the office.

Perhaps because of the legwork we'd done ahead of time, we got in just by flashing our student IDs.

Because you couldn't just pick random jobs here and there, Dean and I split up.

There wasn't much we could do about that.

Even so, because I was usually the one issuing orders, it was quite refreshing to be receiving commands to deal with little tasks, something I hadn't experienced since I was a newbie at jobs in my past life.

We were either delivering files or doing simple calculations.

None of it was very important, so we ended up being quite idle much of the time.

But now I could be Alice and poke around, hearing the rumors and chats of employees that I could never normally listen in on. That at least made me pretty happy.

"Miss Alice, you don't have to finish things up to that extent."

"No. I can't be of huge help to you, but I've learned so much here. This level of work from me is only what I should do, nothing more."

After responding to the employee who had spoken to me, I started work again.

Even though that work was just handling the recycling.

It was trash, but also so much more than that. Some of the contents included files that needed to be burned.

According to stipulations, files needed to be burned thoroughly every single day.

After organizing them, I walked toward the furnace.

Before I threw them out, I glanced over them.

...Bingo.

I said this to myself, smiling inwardly.

There were files that hadn't been completely dealt with, plus the descriptions of residents.

That's exactly what I was looking for.

As to who threw it out—that was easily solved by figuring out whose trash can

it was we were handling, or who asked us to burn the files in the first place.

Now we'd obtained what we had come here for. More importantly, we had finished up a thorough look at the location itself. Our time here had been spent well.

After work, Dean and I met up. After reporting everything and expressing thanks, we returned to our residence.

## Chapter 132: Confirming the investigation | Part 1

“Tanya, please investigate this person. Perhaps they have something to do with this incident.”

“Understood. I’ll look into it as soon as possible.”

“Thanks. How’s everything going on Dean’s side?”

(Dean?) “Other than the people that you pointed out, there are two others of note. In addition, there are several notes that seem not to be directly related to this incident. I’ve filed those away in a separate report for later. Why do you think this person is suspicious, milady?”

After I told her what happened at the office, Tanya’s eyes went wide.

“Something like that...”

“Most of the evidence we’ve gleaned is one-sided. But there’s not reason to waste the clues that we already have.”

“True. My reports haven’t even touched on this person...I’ll figure out how these three are related.”

“That’s on you, then.”

“Understood.”

“Other than that, did you find anything else out from the investigation today?”

“This incident didn’t have anything to do with the Boltique family. Or perhaps I should say...it does relate to them, but they’re not behind it.”

“...What does that mean?”

“Compared to the impression I got from the family, this whole incident feels different to me. Plus, I looked into the person that Dean witnessed yesterday who claimed he was part of the family...”

“And he wasn’t part of the family?”

“Yes. Not only that, he’s a member of one of their enemy organizations.”

“I see.”

“But among the people he was in contact with, some of them belonged to the Boltique family. One of them was the second in power in the family, Emilio. So we can’t say that the family is completely free from suspicion.”

“Is the Boltique family controlling this whole thing from the shadows, or is this Emilio acting on his own...?”

“I believe that the latter is more likely. Some members of the Boltique family are also looking into the matter.”

“I see...Tanya, have you heard anything from Dida?”

“Well...”

She rarely hesitated while speaking like this. I urged her to keep speaking.

“We have no idea what he’s doing, or where he is. From what I’ve heard in the past, he might be part of the organization that is behind this whole thing. That’s why he came here...”

“Dida...”

“Milady. Do you wish to employ guards?”

In response to Tanya’s question, I shook my head.

“No. According to Ryle’s report, we can’t trust the guards here. If we summoned the guards from the capital...”

“Then things would blow up?”

“Exactly. If we catch Dida, then all we have to do is put on a show for bystanders. But if we can’t catch them, and have to chase them? Or what if we imprison him individually but don’t harm him? It will only look like we’re working with them. If a situation like that were witnessed by a significant number of guards...we wouldn’t be able to protect him anymore.”

“What I said was out of place. I’m sorry.”

“No. As you said, we must move quickly.”

“Milady, may I depart shortly?”



“Of course.”

“I want to go to Ryle. If we decide that guards are necessary, I might not return. That’s why I want to be the one to deliver the message.”

Originally I thought she was going to say more about Dida. In that moment, I was shocked.

But her demands couldn’t be denied.

“For something like that, of course you can leave.”

Dean: “Leave her protection to me.”

Tanya originally seemed to be a bit unsettled by the idea of me staying there alone. But after Dean spoke, she left, relieved.

It seemed like somehow her trust in Dean had increased.

## Chapter 133: Confirming the investigation | Part 2

“...The enemy of the Boltique family, huh...”

While mulling it over, I muttered to myself.

“Is their target me, as the rumors say? Or could it be Dida?”

“Dida seems like a more likely possibility. If they were going against you, even if they won, it would be very difficult to go from there.”

“True. But if the rumors are correct, I also...no, I see...”

“Yes. It seems like it was someone who learned about this incident and wanted to take advantage of it. Milady, you have also consolidated surveillance of Van out of concern.”

In response to what Dean said, I smiled in exasperation. I spoke up again.

“I can’t figure out what the second in power of the Boltique family is thinking. Perhaps he’s working with enemy organizations. But the fact that he’s been using the Boltique name is undeniable. It’s quite possible that the missing goods are in their territory. But whether or not they will side by me is a mystery. If they’re investigating too, however, then...”

“It means that at least they don’t want to become public enemies with the Armenia family. If possible, they want to return the missing items and then deal with the whole thing in private.”

“If only they could deal with it that quickly.”

“Perhaps even internally, they don’t know where each family member’s loyalty lies?”

“Ah. In that case, the search itself has sunk into chaos. Or perhaps they’re negotiating...”

“Yep. At a time like this, the second in power can’t slip up.”

“Dean, help me grab a map.”

To soothe my own nervousness, I inhaled deeply.

“If that’s the case, even if I don’t command the guards to show up, Dawson will still move out, and Dida will be in danger. Even though he has acted the way he has, he’s still a knight. Plus, he’s a knight with quite the sense of morality...As for the others, they’ll probably also consider the possibility of interfering in other territories and fail to actively participate. Whatever he’ll think of, he’ll be able to act on.”

The duty of a knight is no more than to protect royalty and the capital.

Even if they do have more power than that, most knights are of noble birth and have many connections. When they choose to interfere in the activities of other lands, their actions will be doubted because of how it relates to their family’s interests. That’s why they don’t often interfere.

More importantly, this is land belonging to the military.

But Dawson would probably jump right into the mix without a second thought.

If he hadn’t grown at all since he chased me out of the academy...then he would still be a courageous, tactless man.

“Here’s the map...please take a look.”

I glanced over the map that Dean gave me. As I looked, I compared it to what I had in mind, and organized the information I knew.

“Dean. Do you know where the Boltique family is based?”

“...Why do you ask?”

“I just wanted to...is that off-limits?”

I hadn’t even finished my sentence when his expression turned serious and stiff. He shrugged.

“...Not really, I shouldn’t say that. After this investigation perhaps we’ll know. Merchants have wide circles. I’ll say this: I think you know the first in power. At times like these if you’re the first in power you can’t lose control.”

“Just now...”

“...I say that, but most of it is just guesswork.”

As he said that, he laughed awkwardly.

“Yep, I somewhat know them. I say that, but of course I’m unaffiliated with all of this, so I don’t know the main members of the organization.”

“You really are full of surprises.”

I mumbled this as I turned toward him.

“Do you find me hard to trust?”

He asked, looking at me.

Not just his words, even his eyes seemed to be asking me what I was thinking.

“It’s all quite amazing. I wasn’t thinking that at all. Perhaps I’ve lost my right to be substitute leader.”

I smiled bitterly.

To meet my gaze better, he squatted down slightly to look at me as I sat there.

The distance between us became even smaller.

My heart began to beat faster.

Ah, damn it. Don’t be so undignified! I scolded myself.

“You haven’t lost those rights at all.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. Please, use me any way you need. If it’s you, anything is okay. I swear that for you, I’d be willing to give up everything. Am I useful to you?”

“...You are. You are.”

His words carried a bit of humor, and I laughed.

“Well then, Dean. Lend me your strength.”

“I’ll do what you say, milady. What do you want from me?”

“I want to meet with the first in power of the Boltique family. If we leave now, is it possible?”

“If we’re heading toward where they’re based, then yes.”

“Take me there then, Dean. We need to go quickly...and help Dida.”

“No matter what?”

“Yes. As we speak now, danger might be closing in on Dida. Dawson might be moving out as well...is there any reason to hesitate?”

There was all that, and the fact that we could potentially close in on one of our goals: making contact with the Boltique family.

“I understand. But milady...”

“What’s the matter?”

“Consider changing into something you can move around more easily in.”

## Chapter 134: Adventures | Part 1

After that, I left our dwellings alongside Dean.

As he suggested, I changed into an outfit that made moving around easier.

The streets looked different after the sun had set.

...And the alleyways were yet another story.

“...Let’s walk this way.”

Holding Dean’s hand, I walked.

“What...are you?”

Everyone we happened to encounter, Dean defeated.

I had heard a lot about how strong he was from Dida and Ryle. Now I saw that it was true.

So now...

“...Who are you?”

“Just someone who wants to meet Graus.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Do you seriously expect Mr. Graus to spare time for a kid like you?”

“That’s not your choice now, is it?...Whoever’s hiding over there, come out already!”

A light scoff. From the shadows of the nearby building, several men emerged.

“What a warm welcome. Does this mean you’ll let us pass? Or...”

“Yeah, right!”

That’s when the battle started. I say that, but...it was really a one-sided situation.

Although he lacked the numbers, Dean was completely calm.

He moved like Dida and Ryle when they were fighting.

The knights in the capital, the duke's guards, all of them moved in the same sharp, quick way...but only now I found myself unable to look away.

This is what simple, quick violence looked like, I thought to myself.

It only took a few minutes. Everyone other than Dean was slumped on the ground.

"Let's go, milady."

Retrieving me from where I was hiding, Dean started to run again.

We arrived at a building that faced the sea.

From the outside, it didn't look any different from other buildings.

He told me to stay in the shadows while he ran toward it.

It was only after the man guarding the door had lost consciousness that he returned, taking my hand and running.

"...?"

We ran quickly but quietly upstairs.

I had already prepared myself for how many people there could be in here... and when I saw that no one was there, I was quite surprised.

Where could they be?

I gave up on that question soon enough.

It seemed like we had arrived at our destination. Dean paused before a door, then turned the door knob, pushing it open.

At the same time, a sword flew toward him out of the corner off my eye.

"Ah...!"

I bit back the shriek that was fighting to come out of my mouth.

All the while, Dean had caught the sword and pushed back, striking down the man who wielded it.

"Stop right there!"

With a thud, the man fell to the ground just as a rough voice rang out.

The sound echoed through the empty room, a sharp, imposing presence.

My gaze moved over. Several muscular men by the wall stopped what they were doing.

“Heh heh heh. What day is it today?”

The only man who was sitting said.

“...It’s been a long time, Glaus.”

Dean said to the man.

“Oh, it has. You keep causing trouble like this...enough is enough.”

The friendly atmosphere transformed within a moment. The man...Glaus, he was threatening us.



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## Chapter 135: Adventures | Part 2

“You make that sound so negative, as if I’m the one causing real trouble.”

“I’m not wrong.”

“It’s just that trouble follows me around, and I deal with it. Aren’t you the one at the center of the trouble anyways?”

The man shifted in his seat.

“You know something.”

“You could say that.”

Dean’s sharp gaze did not let up.

“Well, then, give me the information.”

“You’re acting a bit arrogant, aren’t you?”

Dean said with a snort. The other men in the room moved around.

“All right. Get out of here!”

Surprisingly enough, Glaus was the one who gave the order.

“You might not be able to tell, but this man is his own kind of monster. Even if all of you fought him at once, you’d have to be prepared for the possibility that half of you will die.”

“Come on, don’t say that...I feel like I could at least get up to more than half, right?”

Hearing this, two of the men charged Dean.

With a single wave of Dean’s blade, the two were slumped on the ground.

He had moved so quickly that I hadn’t been able to make out what he did.

“What a terrible personality.”

Saying this, Glaus laughed.

“You haven’t changed, Dean. Do the rest of you understand?...Sorry about

that. Well then, what about the information?”

“You won’t be talking to me. Milady...”

“...A woman?”

All eyes in the room were on me. I walked before Glaus.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Iris Lana Armenia.”

“Arenia...a noble lady. What are you doing here?”

“To strike a deal.”

Glaus burst out into laughter.

“What a riot! The daughter of a noble family, striking deals with me?...Hurry home and eat your fancy pastries before I say something I’ll regret!”

“If only I could. Your side is moving so slowly that I had to come here myself.”

Glaus twitched, his laughter fading into a look of sheer intimidation.

“...Careful what words you pick. I don’t care if you’re a lady or Dean’s woman, I will not be merciful.”

Fear swept over me, but I forced strength and resistance into my body.

“Word has been spreading through the streets that the Armenias and the Boltiques have been working together to exploit the common folk. They think that we are very wily. In short...I, on behalf of myself as well as the duke’s family, wish to end this incident as quickly as possible.”

I laughed as I said this.

If anyone else saw me laughing in this situation as if I had walked into the wrong room, they would probably think it was quite funny.

“Nothing, it’s nothing. Even if I die in vain because of my own recklessness, I’d be able to show the outside world that the duke’s family was not working with you. More importantly, the guards would be able to take this chance...perhaps even the national guard, to move out against you...and we would be able to blame the whole thing on your family without further argument. At that point, it would no longer matter who was behind this whole thing in the first place. If we were able to end this whole incident quickly and without damaging the

reputation of the duke, that would be enough. So if you're going to hurt me, make it quick."

Glaus's face contorted.

"How could I act recklessly after hearing that?"

"Is that so? Well then, let's get back on topic. I want to end this, as do you. I say that we unite our forces. This is the deal I have come here to strike."

"...Can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"In your position, you have the power to devastate us without even making an appearance."

"Yes, I do."

"Then, why...?"

"Even if I destroy your organization, organizations like yours will not disappear completely. No matter how much we crack down, it will only make the likes of you more and more wily. Although it may be more trouble, it's more worth it to retain you as workers toward our cause. After all, you are figures of power in this town."

It was true, the man before me did engage in illegal activities.

But it was also true that they were accepted by the people here, and had become an accepted power in this town.

This whole thing was like that too. Although there were also officials sitting around doing information damage control...If these men were the ones in control, they wouldn't do something like that. It was only when something like this happened that the people would start talking worriedly.

When we were investigating in the town itself, these were the opinions that surprised us a great deal. Even more surprisingly, among the citizens who had been affected by the whole thing, quite a few people had the idea that perhaps someone else was acting on behalf of the Boltique family.

"Or are you telling me that you aren't as good as your reputation says? If

that's the case, I'll do as you wish and immediately issue an order to my family's guard."

Hearing this, Glaus burst into loud laughter.

The men around him followed suit.

## Chapter 136: Adventures | Part 3

“...I admit defeat. I didn’t know what kind of woman I expected you to bring, but...what a good one, Dean.”

“Isn’t she?”

Dean stood up a bit straighter in agreement.

This lot needed to at least try to be more dignified.

“No matter what kind of fancy words you use on people like us...well, we’re ultimately just thugs. But we had our rules too, and we know that there’s a line you don’t cross. In other words, if we don’t meet your expectations, we’re not fit to be called the Boltiques.”

“Does that mean you’ll help us? Lend me your power.”

“Yes. As a matter of fact, I’d say that you’re doing us a favor.”

The deal...was done.

I didn’t show it on my face, but I was quite relieved by how smoothly the whole thing had gone.

Gaining Glaus as an asset was quite the accomplishment.

Even so, things were far from over.

“Then let’s get started. Let me see all of your bases.”

Glaus nodded.

“Come here, we’ll show you.”

A man standing near the wall walked toward the map nearby and pointed out each location one by one.

“...And then there’s here.”

“Why here?”

“This place is connected with an underpass that’s under construction at the moment. With the help of officials, we could make use of it. We who are with

the Boltiques use the place for temporary storage, as well as for when we need to move around.”

“...I see.”

“By the way, the stronghold that Tanya pinpointed for the mastermind behind all this is right next to here. Here.”

I pointed to a place on the map. Dean nodded.

“What will we do? Should we just go directly?”

“Yes...before that, let’s go to the local police station to pick up Tanya.”

“Yes, milady.”

“I’ll tell you the location...so are you moving out too?”

“Yes. We have to take this into our own hands. Is that okay with you?”

“It is. You need to show your faces in public. Unlike my family’s correlation with this whole thing, some of the rumors about you are true. Also, make saving a man named Dida with brown hair. I can’t explain to you why you must do this, but it’s highly important.”

“Oh?”

“Also, no half-assing it. If you do anything along the lines of protecting your own companions for their wrongdoing, I’ll call out the guards.”

“Haha! That sounds perfect. All right, everyone, let’s get ready for this!”

In response to Glaus’s calls, all the other men in the room seemed to feel motivated.

“Well then, please allow us to leave and rest.”

“Go ahead. When all of this is over, come here again! We’ll welcome you with all our hospitality.”

“That sounds perfect. I look forward to that day.”

With that, we returned to the streets as quickly as we could.

## Chapter 137: Battlefield

Soon enough, we met up with Tanya again.

We had to endure quite the rant from her.

Well, nothing that we didn't expect.

Anyways, I'll continue this later...and so on. After she finally agreed to delay her scolding, we set out again.

This was because according to Tanya, Dawson should be with Dida as well.

As we expected, Dawson had dived into the whole situation.

If that were it then it wouldn't be such an issue. But he seemed to have seen a man emerge from the sewer, conclude that it was suspicious, and snuck in...as a result, he charged right into the stronghold of whoever was in charge of this whole thing, which was also where Dida was being held captive.

Perhaps his actions were actually quite similar to what we had anticipated.

If we could figure out where Dida was being imprisoned, there would be no more proof that we were cooperating with whoever was behind all of this. It would be quite the lucky break. Plus, it would be useful in showing that we were innocent.

Dawson wanted to rescue Dida, but was attacked from behind and unceremoniously defeated.

Right now the two of them were snoozing together quite peacefully...that was the situation.

He really did go the extra mile, I thought. Because Dawson had taken the extra effort to go in through that side, the underground door had been locked permanently.

Now we couldn't carry out a rescue mission from there. The only option was moving in and attacking upfront.

I was set up in a hotel nearby. In the end because of how uneasy I was, I came with the others.



By the way, the only one who didn't come to the east on this trip was Ryle. He was in charge of watching over the guards.

It seemed that he caught someone who was related to the plot quickly enough.

The relevant evidence was all handed over to Tanya to deal with. This was what they were doing when I was infiltrating the main office.

After we'd finished all our preparations, Ryle was the one who carried out the punishment in public...which was basically just a breakdown of what the rules were, what the guard should be, and so on, a lecture to all the others.

With a final encouraging ending, he then ordered the guard to come here... more or less just to buy time.

From now on the members of the Boltique family were going to start acting out, and it would be troublesome if we bumped into that.

They were in charge of cleaning up after everything ended as well.

All that aside, we finally arrived at our destination.

It was a place near the sea, thick with the scent of salt.

There were many storage buildings, and our destination was also a warehouse.

We were there right when the Boltique family was having their own facedown, members standing against each other. In the middle was Glaus and Emilio.

"Please excuse me."

Saying this, Dean ran in the opposite direction.

For a moment, I watched him fade into the darkness...but soon enough my consciousness came back to the two in the middle.

"...Emilio, you really have balls."

"Shut up! Glaus, you've always been soft! I can do things bigger and better."

"Hah...when you climbed to the top with such despicable methods, I could see right through you. But don't worry about it. If any of you have ever spat on our

faces and disrespected us, we'll deal with you all equally. Let's go!"

His wild cry set off a series of full-bodied shouts all throughout the building.

Following that, the sound of men charging each other rang out.

It was completely different from what Dean or Ryle or Dida had showed me.

Crude. That was a good word to describe the violence here.

"How is it going, Dean?" asked Tanya.

"The underground passage goes to a door above ground, and the back door has been blocked off by the Boltiques. They won't be able to escape."

"They've prepared to do what has to be done...In that case, I'm heading out."

Tanya entered the fray.

She slipped between people without any issue.

Finally, she reached the room deep within.

There were more foes than friends there, but she continued on. For Tanya it was business as usual.

Before long, Dida walked out of the room alone.

From a distance, it was easy to see that his face was swollen.

If I were closer, then I'd probably be able to see even more wounds.

In his current state, he didn't hesitate, charging right into the brawl.

"Y-you! What are you doing?"

Although I knew he wouldn't be able to hear my voice, I still couldn't help but shout at him.

Disregarding my concerns, Dida charged out.

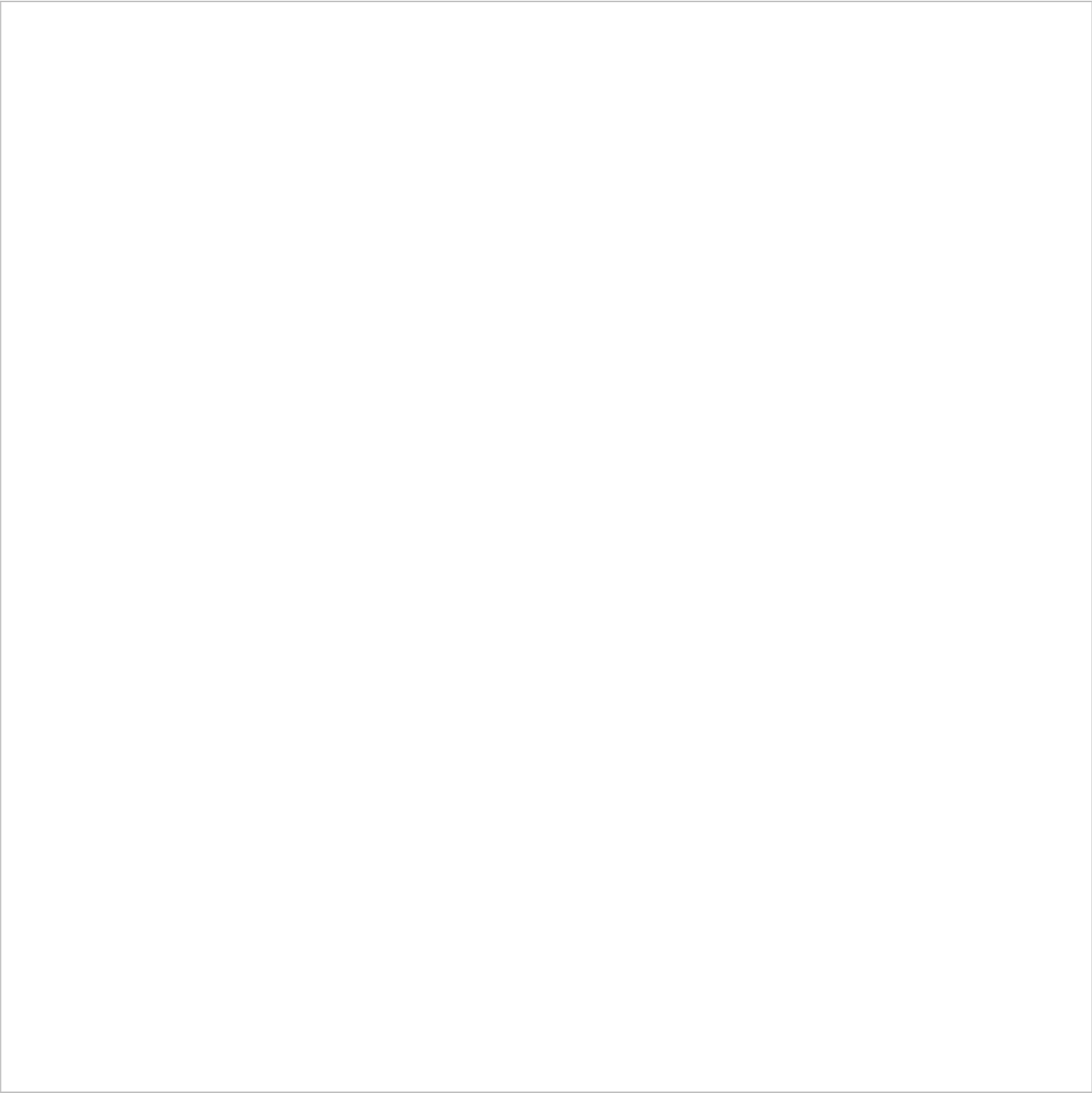
He was like the eye of a tornado. The men around him flew across the room, one after another.

His strength really lived up to its reputation. That was all I could think to myself in the moment of awe.

Caught between the Boltique family and Dida, the amount of men dwindled.

And then, when he reached the center of the room...

Dida found a sword.



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## Chapter 138: Passing each other

“Terry!”

That booming voice echoing through the room came to my ears as well.

Dida’s expression turned into something rare...not flippancy, but a terrifying look of seriousness.

A man responded to Dida’s voice.

“...The leader of the masterminds, huh.”

What Dida said in a quiet voice shocked me.

I couldn’t have expected that the leader of the organization behind this knew Dida.

The moment Terry saw Dida, his expression turned to one of shock. But soon enough, the corners of his mouth rose, and he left where he was standing to approach Dida.

Even seeing it from an outsider’s perspective, it was clear enough that the Boltique family had the upper hand.

In the middle of it all, Terry and Dida confronted each other.

“What, you’re out? Sorry to ask this of you, but couldn’t you just stay put for a bit longer? I guess it doesn’t matter. No matter what, this is all about to end soon. For you and for me.”

“...You’re right. Let me end it.”

Saying this, Dida pulled his sword out.

His heavy tone was also different from usual.

The way he drew his sword and the aura he was giving off combined almost gave the feeling that he was about to carry out some sacred ceremony.

“Are you about to point that at me?”

“...Yes. Even if you were my companion, none of that matters anymore. By becoming enemies with milady, you must be punished.”

The moment Dida said this, Terry burst into rowdy laughter.

“Are you trying to play the role of a knight? Even you’ve become so high and mighty...it’s really great that a noble lady chose to adopt and feed you.”

In that moment, Dida moved.

To Dida, who had received the training he had, a man like Terry wasn’t even worth of being his opponent.

Within an instant he stroke him down. Even when he fell to the floor he kept attacking.

He didn’t even give him a chance to fight back.

“...I have one last question for you.”

Dida’s voice seemed squeezed out of his teeth.

The Boltique family had already won its victory. Aside from them, Dida and Terry were the only outsiders present.

They also seemed absorbed by the conversation between Dida and Terry, their eyes focusing on them.

“Why would you do something like this?”

“Why?...Hah. What do you want to do with that knowledge?”

“Nothing. I just want to know before you’re arrested.”

Hearing this, Terry burst into laughter again.

“Hahaha...arrest, huh. You really think you’re something impressive! You’re no different from me—a little boy from the slums!”

At the end of his sentence, Terry was roaring.

The despair in his voice was palpable.

“Why are you the only one who can walk as a human on this earth? Why are you the only one who walks on the path of luxury? Aren’t you the same as me?”

“Is that the reason...”

“Oh, yes! I wanted to climb up in this underworld too. But my most important reason was you, Dida!”

Terry's words made Dida frown immediately.

"Why are you the only one who went somewhere bright..."

When saying this, Terry seemed as if he were about to cry.

"Terry..."

Dida called his name, but Terry just started laughing again.

"So for all I care, you can go to hell! Fall deeper and deeper and deeper! If someone like me who's done all that I have claims to be your companion, what would your owner say?"

Ah, I seem to have been called out.

Dida looked toward me. He looked very confused...I responded with a happy smile.

And then I started walking toward him.

Dean followed behind me.

After seeing that it was me, everyone in the Boltique family stepped aside.

## Chapter 139: Resolve and sincerity

“I’ll take him home.”

Hearing me say that, not just Terry, but Dida as well looked shocked.

Was it toward my entrance, or what I said?

“I am Dida’s master, Iris. I really must thank you for looking after Dida this time.”

I smiled as I spoke. For some reason, all the members of the Boltique family took a step back together.

I really didn’t get it...thinking that, I tilted my head to the side as I fixed my eyes on Terry.

“I’ve been listening. Your hatred seems to be misdirected.”

“Wha...”

“Isn’t it true? What do you hate about Dida? His success? That’s what he gets in exchange for putting up with his master’s random requests, for his own efforts in training, for working hard ceaselessly...Or perhaps it’s a difference in talent? Dida himself can’t do anything about that.”

“You...mmph.”

The intention behind my words was successful in stirring up Terry’s emotions. He tried to stand but was pushed down by Dida.

“If it’s the differences in your lives, then it’s even more misdirected. You should only hate the powerless person who saved him—me. Or maybe my family.”

In response to what I was saying, both Terry and Dida’s eyes went round.

“Even so, what would happen if you reversed the roles of you and Dida?”

My voice sounded colder than what I had envisioned.

“Because that’s what you are, right? All you know is how to envy, even to the extent that you’d get the innocent involved...you only want to vent your

frustrations toward your current situation and pretend that they're someone else's mistakes. It's someone else's mistakes and you're the protagonist of the tragedy...and so on and so forth. All you want is to maintain that delusion."

Terry couldn't say anything.

His eyes were wide. Even his expression didn't change.

"I will sympathize with you. I will pity you. But I will never understand you."

Like an empty shell, he didn't react at all.

"...Dida, do you have anything else to say to him?"

"No. I'm satisfied."

Saying this, he smiled.

His smile wasn't as open and laidback as usual. Instead it had an air of helpless melancholy.

"Then arrest him."

It must be hard for Dida...even though I thought of that, Dida shook his head and started to move.

"Everything has already come this far. No matter what I do, it won't make a difference."

We couldn't spare him, couldn't lessen his sentence.

You should understand that...I thought as I looked at him. Understanding what I was thinking, Dida still nodded.

I looked away from them.

What had to be done was done. What had to be said was said.

The only thing that remained was to greet that troublesome young man.

"I'll never forget his name. I'll never let myself to forget—as one of the causes of this whole incident."

I said this softly.

I couldn't forgive his sins, or the hatred that he projected onto Dida.



But at the same time...I felt that I couldn't look away from him.

I had to confront his existence, and the reason that he caused all of this.

To ask for forgiveness from him was out of the question.

Even if I did, it wouldn't mean anything. Plus, something like that, from my point of view, became impossible when I learned that he was the mastermind.

So this was just my own decision. My own selfish decision.

Selfishness and sincerity.

"So you're Dida?"

When I stopped talking, Glaus asked Dida.

"I'm Glas. When I heard that you were caught by them, I thought you were nothing special...but you're quite capable. How were you caught?"

Dida responded to Glaus's question with an exasperated smile.

In response to this, Glaus started to laugh.

"You're a good man. I'm guessing that you trusted an old friend and was deceived? As a guard of a noble lady you made the wrong decision. But I don't hate idiots like you."

He laughed again.

"You're quite skilled too. Don't waste that...if it weren't for the fact that the lady found you first, I would take you in in a heartbeat."

"I wouldn't give him to you."

My jab only made Glaus laugh louder.

"No, well...I said that, but I don't mean it. I'm just playing with you. I'm just... well, it just means that you're not just lucky. Perhaps you're being taken care of by the goddess of fortune...but she's not a patient one. If you don't grab her hand when she offers it, she'll disappear without a trace. You made the effort and turned opportunity into something that belonged to you. And now you're the kind of man that even I want. So on and so forth. Although you probably don't like to hear me talking like that either."

Not just a lucky man.

So you shouldn't pay attention to what Terry was saying...that's what Glaus seemed to be hinting at. But Dida shook his head.

I couldn't help but be impressed by what Glaus said.

Men that like each other out of respect...I guess that's the kind of man that Glaus is, I thought to myself.

"...Dammit. I do admire the lady's eye for men. If only you knew your own strengths. She stole what could've been a great warrior from us."

"Well, that's all on you. I for one am going to keep a strict eye on him now."

Glaus chuckled.

"Well then, we're going back. Emilio is one of ours anyways. Your guard are here for you too."

"Kind-hearted citizens will spread the news to the police that the Boltique family was the one repressing trouble here. It's almost like you guys were heroes of justice. Perhaps that'll even spread throughout the streets of the city."

"Don't say that, that's not our style...Everyone, let's go!"

Men began to leave through the backdoor after hearing Glaus's command.

From their neat formation, it wasn't difficult to see his power.

"Well then, Dida. Time to go back."

"Huh?"

"I only had Tanya go over to secure your safety and identity. I could've never expected you to run out on us like that. At the moment Tanya is probably keeping Dawson from running out by keeping him unconscious. You and him stay there and wait to be rescued together. We can't reveal that we had any kind of partnership with them, and we can't rescue only you...you see."

"I understand...Milady, this incident..."

"We can talk about it later. The guard are about to arrive."

Dida very rarely called me milady. I understand that what he wanted to say must be important.

But the guards were about to arrive.

“I’ll listen with my full heart to what you have to say later.”

He turned around and walked deeper into the room.

“As you wish, my princess.”

Saying this, he smiled. Relieved, I finally left.

## Chapter 140: Crime and punishment

With the help of the guards, we caught the masterminds behind this whole incident.

Before they even arrived, the culprits were already restrained and unable to move.

The female residents...it was Tanya's report. But it seemed like the ones who did this was the Boltique family.

It was probably in an effort to resolve this incident's aftermath that they came along to investigate for themselves and handled the issue accordingly.

Other than that, the duke's family had sensed something wrong and carried out their own secret investigation. The guards that had been caught were rescued then

In short, the rumors that this incident was related to the duke's family were completely baseless.

Although there would be damage control afterwards, it was great that they ended up resolving everything in one fell swoop.

And then it was time to honor my promise to the man in the middle of all this, Dida. But after a first talk, all we managed to do was decide that we would talk in three days.

That was because as an involved party Dida had to go write a testimony, and visit the hospital to see if there was anything physically wrong with him.

"...I'm sorry."

That was the first thing he said. Although it was a bit rude of me, I was stunned into silence.

This wasn't in Dida's character script.

Jokes aside...

"What are you apologizing for?" I asked him.

“Everything. If it wasn’t for me, this whole thing wouldn’t have happened at all. Because a lowly servant like me was trapped by my own mistake, your options for action were reduced. In the end, whether it was acting out like that or the whole thing with Terry, you ended up having to resolve them. None of my actions were befitting of a personal guard like me. So even if I am exiled, I have no complaints.”

His sincere response made me smile.

“Dida, the only thing that you should be apologizing for this time is that you made me worry about you.”

My response made Dida’s eyes go wide.

“But...!”

“If you weren’t here? I know your past, but even knowing that I’ve kept you by my side. If you weren’t here, then my only trustworthy, excellent guard would be Ryle. In that case I wouldn’t be able to freely leave home, and my policies wouldn’t be as far ahead as they are. Lowly, that’s the word you used...I thought that you left to investigate to give yourself a shot of adrenaline. You’ve always been so decisive in your action. It seems like I’m the one who has failed in judgements. And the whole thing with Terry...I was the one who chose to involve myself, so you have no need to apologize.”

“But...I still can’t forgive myself.”

Dida’s response was completely serious. I sighed and smiled at him.

“Haven’t you already accepted your punishment? Dida.”

I asked him.

“You trusted him? Terry. And Glaus guessed the details of your capture... didn’t he?”

What I said next made Dida’s eyes go even wider.

“Being betrayed by someone you trust...I know that pain. Even though there’s a difference to the specific degree, I think that the pain you suffer inside is probably the same.”

Between me and him, who had suffered more.

I didn't plan on bringing up a stupid question like that.

There was no meaning to it.

I wasn't him, and he wasn't me.

What kind of attitude you had toward the person who betrayed you...it can't be expressed in words.

To Dida, Terry was important.

I wanted to talk more about Terry, but the dejected smile that Dida had made me shoot down the idea. This is what I learned from visiting others.

How deeply he was hurting...I didn't understand.

Compared to what I suffered, perhaps he was suffering even more.

So the fact that I thought I could understand him might have made him feel unhappy.

But I've experienced both of those types of pain.

And knowing that...I think that he didn't even need to suffer any more pain that he already was.

"If you still can't forgive yourself...then place higher demands on yourself when working. If you still want to leave after that, I won't stop you."

Ryle was already being admired by the knights' order and the military association. After this incident, Glaus would be looking out for Dida too.

He had plenty of places to work if he wanted.

That was an expression of his talent.

"No...I only want to work for you."

"Thank you. The fact that you have that intention is enough."

Dida lowered his head.

I couldn't see his expression, so I spoke up again.

"I'm just happy that you're safe. The idea that I'd never be able to hear your bright voice again...I keep thinking bad thoughts like that. Just rest today. I hope that I'll be able to see you tomorrow just as I have in the past."

“All right.”

Seeing the smile appear on his face, I breathed a sigh of relief.

After Dida left, Tanya set several reports down before me.

“Has Priest Ralph responded?”

“Yes. His response is here.”

Tanya retrieved the envelope, and I took it from her.

“I’ll just look at this letter and these documents for now then...Tanya, you should relax more.”

“Milady?”

“You have a lot to say still, don’t you? You’ve been worried about Dida. I can tell.”

Tanya frowned at this.

“It’s nothing, I...”

Her voice sounded stiff. In the end, she couldn’t come up with an appropriate response.

What a stubborn one. I handed a file to her.

The contents were Ryle’s reports on his investigation of the eastern guard.

If I were coming back to my work, this was something I needed to know right now.

“Can you give this to Dida?”

“...If I don’t...”

Tanya took the document unwillingly and left the room.

Watching her leave, my gaze landed on Priest Ralph’s letter.

“Ah, as alert as ever. What a quick response. It’s high time for us to start moving out too.”

Muttering this, I folded up the envelope.

## Chapter 141: Dida and Tanya

"I'm coming in, Dida."

After knocking, I walked into his room.

He sat on the chair, looking as if he were deep in thought.

This room wasn't very big, probably not much for anyone who was living here.

But me and Dida had been with milady's family for a long time. Sebastian always arranged a spacious room back then to use as a single-resident room.

"This is from Lady Iris. If you're coming back to work, you should read this."

"T-thanks." Dida smiled and accepted the document.

"Also, before you plan on coming back, do something about that expression of yours."

"Is this another pointer from Lady Iris?"

"No. It's advice from me."

My words made Dida laugh.

It was the kind of laugh that didn't have much feeling to it.

"I'll say it first. I won't forgive you"

"How merciless. You already gave me quite a lecture back then."

"Quite a lecture? That's not how I remember it."

Although I said that, I couldn't help but recall what it was like when he was imprisoned.

Back then...he, who had suffered through countless torments, smiled when he saw me enter the room.

It wasn't a smile of relief, rather a smile that marked a loss of self-control, a moment of self-abandonment, not as bright as usual.

"How are your wounds?" I had asked.



“No problem...sorry, could you undo my cuffs?”

“What are you talking about? I’m here to ensure your safety and protect you and Dawson. I’m trying to prevent you from being captured as a hostage again. But you’re talking about taking them off? What are you planning to do if I take them off? What can you do in your current state?”

“I want to end things.”

“End things? Hah...end things! I don’t want you to disappoint me again on this.”

“If you’re disappointed, then you’re disappointed. I can only do what I should do.”

“What you should do? What you should do is stay here with him. Running out like that, you’ll be seen and people will think that we’re connected to the Boltique family. Then what do we do? Plus, what if you get caught again? Your body...you can’t move like you used to, can you?”

“I know my own body best. I’m in no worse shape than before.”

“I can’t trust that. You were already caught once.”

“I was caught up in my emotions, and I deserved that...but I’ve already abandoned pointless sadness like that.”

“If you’ve already abandoned it, then why do you need to end anything?”

“I want to turn it into something concrete. Even when you abandon something, the ghost of the past will still haunt you consistently. Right now what’s most important is that after this crisis...after this confrontation I need to have ended that part of my past.”

“No...if you do that, what do we do about him?”

Our eyes turned down together. Dawson was lying on the ground. He didn’t even wake up to us arguing like this. What a heavy sleeper. What a careless man.

Boring thoughts like these kept bubbling to the surface of my mind.

“You’re here. If he wakes up, just knock him out again.”

“But...”

“Come on. If I just go on like this, I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself. And how could I even face Lady Iris or you like that?”

He looked at me, his expression dead serious.

“Lady Iris is my savior, and my master. To protect her, I don’t even care about giving up my life...but right now she’s in danger because of my mistakes. I can’t allow that. So if I’m caught and end up bringing her more trouble, I will choose death without hesitation.”

“You don’t sound like you’re kidding.”

“Ah.”

I removed the cuffs from his hands.

He checked his arms and then stood up.

“After confirming that the mission has been carried out safely...if we meet up with Lady Iris again, she’ll probably just forgive you. But I won’t, Dida.”

“That suits me well enough.”

And then he ran off to confront Terry.

Thinking of all that, I opened my eyes again.

“...Even if she forgave you, I won’t.”

“Ah.”

“Seeing you fight, I know now. You lost to your past. What you said when you were trapped too...you lost to your memories. And you can’t see what’s in the moment, what’s most important.”

That can’t be allowed.

His investigation, being caught...none of that was the reason I was angry.

But...

“To you, your true intent is to protect Lady Iris. Me and Ryle have the same idea. But is that all your determination is worth?”

“You say that, but there’s nothing I can do about it.” Dida smiled slightly.

In response to a weak answer like this, I could only sigh.

“What, bringing an end to things?”

“Yes.”

“So the man named Terry is a part of these ghosts from your past?”

“Well...I guess you could say that.”

Dida took a deep breath.

“When investigating on the streets, I learned that this incident was connected to Terry. So I immediately reached out to him, trying to stop him...I wanted to convince him.”

Dida muttered as if he were talking to himself. I had to focus my full attention on him to catch everything he was saying.

“You don’t need to say more. You and that guy are close.”

“Yes. He’s like Ryle is to me now...that guy. When I came back to myself we had been together for so long. We were together when we searched for food, did dumb things, joined the organization.”

“Ah, sounds great. When I was treated like garbage I was quite alone.”

“In terms of that he took care of me quite well. And look what that’s turned into. What can I do?”

Dida chuckled.

“One time, the organization ordered us to take something from another. What it was, I don’t know. Anyhow, I had a bad feeling...since it was stealing and all. We were dirty little kids without anyone to back us up. If we succeeded all would be fine. If we didn’t, the organization would throw us away. The thought seemed so terrible that I mentioned to him that we should try escaping the organization. But he responded with the fact that we couldn’t escape to anywhere, that no one would take us in. Eventually I was the one who ended up leaving alone.”

“And then?”

“It went well at first, but we were discovered midway through. I suggested

that I serve as bait and that he leave first with the thing. Our enemies called backup and I was caught and beat badly. But I escaped when I got the chance. And then I bumped into Lady Iris when escaping...and you know all the rest.”

“Yes. The master of the family said yes to using you as a guard. Perhaps because they had investigated your experience?”

“I think so too. Milady’s intense wish plus my capabilities and what I ended up doing in front of excellent servants in service to the family were what made him agree.”

“Yes, it seems to be the case.”

“Separating with Terry under those circumstances...since I was the only one who could escape, I think I felt guilty. So if possible I wanted to convince him. And then I ended up like this. I believed that since I escaped from the environment we had lived in, maybe if we talked things would be better. But when I came to the meeting point, everything went sour.”

“And you were caught.”

“Exactly. I’m not great at convincing others.”

He laughed when he said this, but there was no trace of a smile on his face.

“I probably didn’t even believe myself. I was so suspicious that if anyone believed me they had to be naive...but I wanted to believe. Because that’s the only way that people can build relationships. But it’s impossible. No one should hold expectations like that. Just like you said, I lost to my past.” He clenched his fists until they turned white.

I don’t doubt that his nails were drawing blood from his palms.

“Yes...” I sighed and stood up. Then I walked to his desk.

On top of it rested the documents that I had given him.

I picked it up and handed them to him again.

“Well then, hurry and finish reading them. Tomorrow it’ll be time to come back to work.”

“Ah...ah...”

Because of how quickly I changed the topic, Dida's eyes went wide.

"You've just drawn a line between yourself and your past. It's a hard-earned opportunity. In response, all you need to do is do your job well. The ghosts that have been stopping you have vanished now."

"...You're right."

Affirming what I had said, Dida raised his head.

He had covered his eyes with his arm.

"You're quite decisive."

"Are you trying to comfort me?"

"No...that would be pitiful."

"True."

His words were odd. I thought for a minute, then laughed.

"You and I...and Ryle, we're all the same. Our goal is to protect Lady Iris. As long as we don't get off-target, we will move in that same direction together."

Even if our opinions differ.

Even if our views diverge.

As long as our final goal is the same...we won't ever disagree to that extent.

That's what I think.

"You won't waver, will you?"

"Of course not. Even if I give my life, I'll protect milady."

Dida smiled.

"Your actions this time left our goal...but in the end you came back. You resolved the issue on your own. So I'm not worried about you anymore. Even if I haven't forgiven you...let's work together for the same goal."

"Well then, I'll have to start working even harder. Not just so we can walk together, but also so that you can trust me to have your backs."

"Yes."

“...The fact that I can be here makes me so happy. So happy...”

As he said this, he trembled slightly.

On his face there will still tear stains.

But I pretended not to see them. I left his room.

## Chapter 142: Settlements | Part 1

Ah, I was a bit nervous today. More accurately speaking, the melancholy in my heart was weighing my body down.

After all, today was the day that I was confronting Dawson again.

He had been embroiled in an incident related to my family's territory, so we couldn't just let him go like that.

I didn't really care much for Dawson himself, but I couldn't afford to offend the Kataberia family. It would affect our family's standing in noble society.

That's why we had to invite him into our home.

Of course Tanya, Ryle, and a recovered Dida were all by my side.

Everything had just ended yesterday, and I was still worried about Dida. But he seemed to have returned to his usual flippant attitude.

In Tanya's words, Dida had already adjusted his mental state again.

Before I knew it, Dawson was at the door.

I sat up straight quickly and arranged for him to enter the room. Before long, he was led into the room.

Perhaps because he was still in the middle of a journey, Dawson was dressed much more simply than usual. His expression was also quite calm.

"It's been a long time, Sir Dawson. Please don't be so formal."

I saluted him before sitting down again.

"Well then. What brings you to my territory this time?"

I threw him my question as I sipped on the tea Tanya had prepared for me.

"To understand you."

"Huh..."

What a tangent from the answer I was expecting. I didn't really know how to respond.

“I didn’t know anything about you at all, but I called you out just based on rumors. Although it’s perhaps too late for remorse, I can’t help but wonder if I did the right thing...I’ve developed doubt for my decisiveness back then. So this time I came to your territory and walked around, trying to learn about you.”

“What a flashback to the past, hm?”

I couldn’t help but retort.

What he was saying was still completely illogical.

He wanted to understand me and tried to find more out about me by talking to others, which meant that he was just basing his new judgements on more rumors.

Plus, a solution like that wouldn’t bring him accurate results anyways.

After all that had happened I no longer wanted an apology from him or anything.

If anything, the fact that he was creeping around near me only made me unhappy.

Dawson didn’t get angry at my testy response.

Ah, if it were back then he would undoubtedly react like that.

“You want to understand me so you can see if you were wrong. Well then, what if you find out that you were?”

“I...I don’t know yet.”

“All of this is completely out of order, then.”

I could only sigh at his response.

“In the beginning I was planning on apologizing.”

“Ah, so you thought at first that you had made the wrong decision. But after this visit, you decided that you were right in the beginning?”

“No. Even if I apologized, it wouldn’t serve any use. I can’t change the fact that I hurt you, or bring you back to the academy, or renew your engagement to Prince Edward.”



“You’re very self-aware now. If you’re here to apologize, I’m going to ask you to leave now...and correct you. I’m not weak enough that you are capable of hurting me. And at the moment, I’m not interested in restoring my relationship with the prince.”

“By hurting you, I meant restricting your freedom.”

“Let me restate my claim. No matter in terms of heart or body, I’m not weak enough that you are capable of hurting me.”

I said this bluntly.

If he tried to take responsibility for hurting me then we’d be in a lot more trouble.

“Just as you said, there’s nothing you can do for me. I have no demands for you, after all. Plus, you knew that my territory’s eastern region was unstable, yet you still ran over to interfere.”

“I just wanted to try and help as best I could.”

“All you did was cause trouble for me.”

My smiling, direct response made Dawon’s jaw drop in shock.

“You are a knight. But before that you are the son of the Kataberia family. If something had happened to you, how would I face your family? To much of the outside world, you and I are already at odds because of our past. If something happened to you, I only fear that the outside would spread rumors that I killed you because of a personal grudge!”

“Well...”

Hah...I couldn’t help but sigh again.

When talking with him, how much had I already sighed!

“You haven’t changed at all. It’s great to have a sense of justice, but everything you’re trying to do is for your own sake. Just for your own sense of justice you keep causing trouble for everyone else. In the end, you just create more issues for everyone around you, but you can’t even be responsible for your own actions. It’s like you’re a child trying to play hero.”

“Something like that...”

“Can you say for sure that it’s not true? The trouble that you’ve caused for me is the best proof. Even if you admit your mistake now, just as you say, I can’t return to the academy, and the relationships between our families can’t be mended so easily. What you can do is confront your own actions and the consequences that they brought.”

Dawson was silent.

“The time for dreaming like a child is over. All in all, don’t get involved with me any longer. If you understand what I’m saying, then stop stealthily investigating in nearby areas. Leave my territory as quickly as you can!”

Finishing my forthright rant, I closed the fan in my hand.

This was probably the first time since negotiating that I could actually smile a genuine smile.

The best smile of today!

## Chapter 143: Settlements | Part 2

“Can I ask one final question?”

“If you wish.”

“What do you think of knights?”

“Glorious soldiers that protect the nation...but I really only know one knight. I worry that he'll confuse glory and pride!”

That's the problem with representatives. Because there's only one, you end up confusing them with everyone.

To me, Dawson was a classic example of that.

Although I understood that he couldn't stand for everyone, I couldn't eliminate the doubt I felt toward knights so easily.

“Is that so.”

Dawson's expression seemed clearer now.

“I'm sorry for interfering with your business. Excuse me.”

Saying that, he left decisively.

“Don't relax supervision of him until he leaves the territory.”

I said to Tanya after he left.

Tanya saluted me before leaving.

“What do you think?” I asked the two behind me.

“What, that little knight?”

I nodded in response to Ryle's question.

“I can't read his thoughts, so I can't say much...”

I couldn't help but give an exasperated smile.

“Generally after they learn that a woman their age is so active, and then are scolded by her...it's hard for men to take that silently. It almost feels a bit

passive.”

“So do you think he’ll try something else?”

“No, no, milady...I think that what he’s experiencing is growth!”

“Growth...well, I think that you’re right, Ryle. But the fact that that spoiled young man would grow is a bit hard to imagine.”

Dida giggled out loud, seeming to confirm my thoughts.

“Not just him. Even Dida, you’ve gone through the kind of growth Ryle is talking about.”

“Of course. I was scolded thoroughly yesterday too.”

I didn’t ask who had scolded him. It was all too obvious.

But that was exactly why he currently wore such a relieved expression.

What kind of changes it could’ve caused in him were hard to imagine...but I would leave it at that.

I’d said what I wanted to say.

If Dawson were going to try anything else, I’d no longer be so lenient.

We’d already given the Kataberia family quite a lot of pressure.

I imagined all of them were panicking, although I couldn’t say for sure. It must’ve caused quite a lot of trouble in the house, especially with Dawson’s mother.

Master Dorena...the master of the Kataberia family seemed quite calm.

Was there something additional that I didn’t know going on?

Never mind. All that no longer mattered.

After all, he ended up having nothing to do with all this. Even if it made me unhappy.

But *he* had become completely different.

“Well then, let’s go.”

Hearing my orders, the two nodded.

“You two will have to help guard, then.”

I couldn't help but smile at the sight of the two of them.

Just like always, the two of them were standing by my side.

## Chapter 144: Settlements | Part 3

“...You really don’t learn your lesson.”

I smiled fearlessly. Before me was Van, in his prison cell.

“Lady Iris, please help me, I was suddenly imprisoned here...what have I done wrong?”

“Do you think I know nothing about what you’ve done?”

I said with a cold smile. Van’s jaw dropped, his eyes wide.

Well, well. Showing his true thoughts so easily was a no-no.

I almost failed to hold my laughter back.

“Seems like it’s very easy for you to switch loyalties to the other side. But because of that, you’ve lured out all the remaining supporters of the pope, even those among nobles. The church itself is quite thankful for that.”

Originally I thought that if something like this happened we’d communicate with Priest Ralph, reminding him to act ahead of time. In doing this we also managed to secure his gratitude to us. One could say that we’d accomplished quite a bit with what we had!

“...What have I done...”

“Do you really need me to explain all of it so clearly? You were fooled by their flowery words and spearheaded the effort to embroil Dawson in this incident, probably with the ultimate intent to accuse me. Am I right?”

He was prepared to spread the word that I’d cooperated with the wicked Boltiques to exploit the people. If Dawson could witness that, then they could prepare to light the fuse for outrage.

Following that they intended to use this incident to expel me from Duke Armenia’s household.

Instead of causing a new incident they made use of something that was already happening. Although some of it was workable, it wasn’t quite enough to convict me of anything.

But if they had managed to stir things up and spread them all the way to Queen Ellia, then we'd be in real trouble.

After all, she viewed me as a thorn in her side. Her influence was also quite impressive.

Even though they weren't related to this incident directly, if I hadn't ordered surveillance over Van and Dawson from the very beginning, then it would all have become a lot more complicated. So this time I rewarded the surveillance members with a special bonus.

"The evidence is all here. It doesn't matter what kind of excuses you come up with. Your father has already been replaced because of his unjust actions, so you're nothing more than a normal citizen. Your followers have also been arrested and can't help you with any of this. Did you really think that in your current situation, with no more power than an average citizen, you'd be able to escape unscathed?"

"Please forgive me! They deceived me, used me..."

Van rattled the bars until they creaked, the words pouring from his mouth like blood.

Before that, my guards stepped up and stood in front of me for protection.

"Naturally, this incident will be reported officially to the church and the government through the Armenia family. Whether your punishment is doled out by the government or Duke Armenia's family is up to the church. No matter what, it'll no doubt be a severe sentence!"

Saying that, I turned and left.

Van was still shouting and shrieking behind me, but I had no plans on continuing to listen to his wails.

"It's a relief."

"What?"

"I thought that seeing him face to face would make my determination waver..."

After all, I was a peaceful Japanese citizen in my previous life.

Although the death penalty existed there, it was ultimately a topic that had nothing to do with me.

I thought that seeing someone I knew bewailing their fate would make me hesitate in condemning him.

But in the end, it didn't matter at all.

It was only another part of what I had to do.

That's all I felt.

"It's great that he was the first one I got to confront."

I had given him another chance, but he'd given it up on his own.

Not only that, he had returned the favor with more hostility, and no longer merited my mercy.



## Chapter 145: Inside Story | Part 1

“...Ah, seems like Van and Dawson both weren’t of much use.”

I chuckled.

“You didn’t have much expectations for them in the first place, right? At the most you hoped for a runaway success.”

In response to Divan, I nodded.

“Yes. This time I was just trying to cause a bit of a scuffle...for her.”

The plan was going on quite well.

This incident was just a way to pass the time.

Imagining how flustered she must be was entertainment enough for me.

“How fearful you are. Because of your gams, the whole family was demoted, the family guardian imprisoned, and an exchange of power occurred within the family.”

“Hey, I’m quite kind-hearted. Ultimately those people were just interfering with the pope. It was only a question of sooner or later. I only gave them a final chance to come back from the dead before everything came down on them. Plus, in terms of the time that they failed they were just a pawn abandoned by Ellia’s party, and were of no significance to the larger picture.”

Divan was the one to laugh this time.

“What a pity about Van and Dawson. I had expectations for them...I guess that the boy isn’t as capable as he seems.”

I had prepared a better way for Van to exit the scene, but the woman had everything guarded too well, so I could only give up.

And the dissatisfaction from that had caused all of this.

“Oh? How strict. I thought that you would be just like your mother.”

“Don’t mention my mother. How many times do I have to say it before you understand?”

“...I’m sorry, excuse me. I just think that you should thank her. Only because of her have you been able to grow to your current state.”

“Hmph...what is that, a new joke?”

“No, those are my genuine thoughts. Only with that kind of bad example could you become who you are today.”

I thought a bit about what Divan had said.

It was true, Mother was a good instructor...if you only looked at her from the opposing side.

## Chapter 146: Inside Story | Part 2

My mother was born in the Towair Kingdom.

The reason for coming to this country...she was a spy coming to investigate this country, responsible for communicating what she had learned back to her own country.

As planned, she infiltrated the palace. It seemed at first that her work was going well.

And then, for some reason, she fell in love with a mere baron.

Mother was an extremely beautiful woman.

Beauty can be a weapon as well.

That doesn't mean that a beautiful appearance was enough. What mattered was the situation in which you used it.

The average-looking infiltrated the towns and cities, but the beautiful could use their appearances to capture the upper levels of an enemy nation.

Of course, my mother didn't just have beauty, but also other traits that people envied.

Those aside, she set a honey trap with her beauty...in other words, a seduction.

Even with all that, why would she become delusional...he was no more than a baron, and she was the one to fall in love first. It was almost too embarrassing to laugh at.

Well, thanks to that, I was born.

After that, she refused orders from Divan, even after all he'd gone through to find her.

This was seen by the servants of the baron's main wife, who exposed her identity. After that, she seemed to have departed the baron's home.

Even Divan admits that the whole thing was a failure.

No matter what, his goal was that I be recognized as a member of the baron's family and become a noble fit to enter their social world.

And that's when his plan fell apart.

Divan had failed at the most essential part.

I guess the fact that he managed to get back to the baron's home made it passable.

Ironically enough, it was only thanks to the main wife that he was able to do so.

She seemed to have told Mother off.

"You are a blemish in this family. Just by staying here you bring trouble to your husband. Leave immediately. If you don't, I will report you to the country." That was more or less what she said.

In the end, Mother left without an argument. After that the other wife feared that if she reported it to the country, the baron's family would suffer unnecessary suspicion, so she decided against it.

Even so, why did Mother leave so silently?

Using my existence as a shield, she should be able to turn around and threaten the baron's household instead.

If her identity was exposed, they were the ones who should be afraid.

But she not only didn't do that, but left the family so as not to cause the man trouble.

She left without much preparation or savings.

Although she gave birth to me without issue, because of how we wanted for money, life was very difficult.

Rumors spread amongst the people around us—a beautiful pregnant woman, without any belongings, had ended up there.

Although none of the adults said anything out loud, the attitudes that the people around us showed was enough to make the children understand too.

...Because of it, I had many cruel words thrown at me.

Just exclusion was nothing. I was also scolded, humiliated.

I asked Mother before why I had no father. She gave me nothing but a vague answer.

If Divan hadn't shown up and told me everything, then I would have lived my whole life without knowing anything.

Divan taught me many things.

Such as observing others, choosing mannerisms to speak in that would obtain their goodwill, how to deal with various subcultures.

He also told me that the world was a huge place. The world of ill will that I lived in was infinitely tiny.

I hide the fact that I had met him from my mother.

Although I was ashamed to make it a secret, I also felt a thorough happiness.

## Chapter 147: Inside Story | Part 3

During that time, Mother fell ill.

It was an epidemic.

Although there was medicine that could treat the illness, it was too expensive for us to buy.

Divan had gone back to his original job, and I didn't have anyone to discuss it with.

Just as I grew more and more lost, Mother's condition became worse and worse.

In that case...I visited the baron's home that I had heard about from Divan.

Perhaps they would help me.

Don't even talk about help, they slammed the door in my face. I didn't even get to see the baron.

Not only so, to ensure that my exposed mother died for sure, the main wife began to take action.

Although Divan helped us when all seemed lost, I don't know what things would've turned into without him.

He was very angry.

A little thought should be enough to make me understand that even without the relation to the Towair Kingdom, I was still quite the eyesore for the main wife.

"But isn't the head of the household my father? I thought that he'd help us if he knew what kind of situation we were in!"

Divan warned me as I shouted these words.

Stop dreaming.

He had said that he'd found his true love, without caring that it was his first time meeting her. In the end, he wouldn't divorce his original wife.

And after she ran away, he never looked for her.

To a noble like him, this was just a game of love.

And when I was born from the result of this game, he didn't care in the slightest.

I couldn't argue with him.

In other word, I finally understood things.

The interaction between people is ultimately nothing more than a game of lies and deception.

If you managed to trick the other person, you've won.

Isn't that what Divan had taught me as well?

Infatuation, love, were all byproducts of that line of thought.

If you fall in love, you lose.

If you trust the other person, you lose.

My mother was a loser.

...Ah, well.

Such an easy-to-understand principle.

Well then, I'll use all the tools in my arsenal and everything that I had to fight.

Fight, and then deceive.

The people who looked down on me on this street, and the people of the baron's family.

And also Mother, who had put me into this situation in the first place.

Lie, cheat, work up the chain, and then look down at all of them.

I made my vow then.

## Chapter 148: Inside Story | Part 4

But that vow was broken immediately.

My mother died.

It was far too late when I got the medicine from Divan.

What shocked me was that I didn't cry.

Most of my thoughts centered around how tragic all of this was.

My poor, pitiful mother.

When you've lost, all that remains is a lowly death.

I would never become what my mother was.

Although everything that had driven her out had already collapsed...

As a substitute, I would complete my mother's original mission.

I didn't have any attachments to this country, so I didn't care what it became.

This would be the proof that I had surpassed her.

"As you said, after the main wife passed away the baron led me into his family. In some sense he wasn't a bad instructor. Even though the whole thing was hilarious, made me want to laugh out loud."

The children of nobility gathered together, living together.

Using this as an excuse, I grew close with nobility, practicing society before I could enter it.

Although that was a significant reason, it was also a place for the children without engagements yet to meet.

In other words, we studied a certain level of manners before entering the academy

On the surface we seemed to have entered school for our studies...how shallow.

In some sense, lineage was also used as a pawn, even in what looked like easy



social interactions.

Although I had thought about making good connections with more notable families...to me who had just entered the ranks of nobility from the world of peasants, it wasn't as easy as that.

Well...despite that, I turned that on its head and used it, and ended up achieving my goals easily enough.

What I had learned from Divan was more useful than what I learned from the baron.

"...Something like that, it is whatever it is. Well, Divan, it's your turn to shine, isn't it? You'll amuse me, right?"

"Of course."

Divan responded with a smile.

Seeing his smile, I smiled too.

## Chapter 149: Post-incident report

“Habit is such a fearful thing.”

Sitting in the midst of countless files, I couldn't help but mutter this to myself.

The only thing accompanying me was the sound of a quill racing across a page, echoing through the room.

Before my eyes was several mountains of paperwork.

Not a few stacks, but a few mountains.

Aside from the regular to-dos that needed me to make a decision, there was also the portion that had been left behind due to the riots earlier.

...At least it was better than what it had been during the last riots.

Since that whole thing, I had developed the habit of preparing for everything.

Of course I didn't want anything to happen. But preparation of this kind was exactly what I needed to handle the situation if anything did end up going wrong.

“Well then, we should be wrapping up soon...”

Unfortunately, something did end up going wrong. And my preparation was what helped us out this time.

“Thank you so much for your help, Sebastian.”

“If you are to thank anyone, I believe that it might be best to thank Mr. Dean. He gave all the orders for everything to be handled appropriately before he left.”

“Ah...he was in such a rush when leaving too. I'm thankful for his aptitude.”

Although his name caused a ripple in my heart, I didn't show it on the surface.

“Excuse me, milady.”

Accompanied by a knock on the door, Tanya walked in.

The expression on her face was obviously one of confusion.

“I have something to report to you, milady. Is this a good time?”

“Yep. I was just taking a break from the work, so now is fine. What did you want to report?”

“I had two things. The first is that I’ve heard rumors that Dawson has retired from the knights’ order. At the same time, the Katabelia family plans to cut ties with him. I believe that the latter news will be reported to the Armenia family through more official means.”

“I see...where is Dawson moving, then?”

“He seems to have gone missing after returning to the capital...Should we send someone to follow him?”

“Sure. Right now, he has nothing left. Wealth, reputation...nothing. The only thing he holds to his name is the skills he’s learned up to this point. But even those skills won’t be a problem to deal with if Ryle and Dida are here for us. So while we’re sending people out to follow him, I also want to send out more people to understand the movements going on in the capital.”

“Understood. Then I’ll do as milady says.”

“Thanks. What else did you have to report?”

“It was about the recently announced punishment for Van and the other nobility responsible for inciting this incident. Van himself will suffer the same fate as the previous pope, and will be granted a goblet of poisonous wine by the royal family to end his life. As for the other nobles, they will be removed from positions of power and imprisoned for life.”

I looked calmly over the list of names Tanya had passed me. “I see.”

“...Milady, you don’t seem very shocked.”

“When I handed them to the government to decide, I already knew more or less what was going to happen.”

The thought made me smile bitterly.

Van right now was a completely average citizen without any sort of backing.

...Even in that position, he still schemed against me, a noble with the title of

duke to my family. No matter how he thought about it, it wasn't possible for him to escape unscathed.

Unless he wanted to completely overturn the country's hierarchical system, there was no way for him to get out.

In the past, he had religion as a protection charm. But now someone like him who continued the bloodline of the previous pope was only a liability.

No doubt, Queen Ellia wanted to eliminate all future liabilities before this whole thing turned into more fodder for gossip.

"The fact that this was all decided so quickly did surprise me...but I only handed this over to the government knowing how they would decide it. We already extended a helping hand to him once, and the one who rejected it wasn't anyone else but himself. Well then, according to what we said, we'll just eliminate all those nobles standing in our way and use him as the living sacrifice for this whole thing. Isn't that perfect?"

To Queen Ellia's party, after all, Van and all the other nobles who happened to be pulled into this incident were just a group of disposable pawns that could be abandoned for greater gain, not even worth mentioning.

Even so, the leader whose territory sat toward the north of Duke Armenia's home, was also in the list of punished names for this incident. Perhaps this meant that he seemed to have completed his duty of luring Van to the hook.

...Of course, after raising the taxes on this leader, he still kept drilling into idiotic details on all sorts of affairs, and was generally so annoying that he was unbearable.

"You're right, milady. Although I'm disappointed that I couldn't have ended his life myself, the fact that he died bending over backwards for your sake is in itself rather perfect."

Tanya presented this idiosyncratic view that made me laugh out loud.

"Well then, thank you for your hard work in delivering this report. Please confirm whether or not the sentence is carried out. If he escapes death, who knows what kind of trouble he'll cause elsewhere. And now, Tanya, I want to invite you to drink a cup of tea with me in the salon as a break together."

Hearing me say this, Tanya's face blossomed into a bright smile.

Because she always worried over my physical condition, hearing me say that I wanted to rest put a genuine smile on her face.

And this smile allowed me to ignore the sticky, filthy feelings that lingered in the corner of my heart, pushing me to come into my full self again.

## Chapter 150: Tea party

I left the room. After quite a walk I finally reached the salon and sat down.

Seamlessly, Tanya placed a cup of tea before me.

“Mm...this is delicious.”

“Thank you for your kind words. Please excuse me. If you need anything, please let the servant waiting on you know.”

“All right, thank you.”

Tanya walked out of the room, her footsteps completely silent. After that, I exhaled the breath stopped up in my throat and inhaled deeply.

When I breathed in, the scent of the vanilla tea entered my nostrils.

...Finally, I felt calm.

The moment I learned from Tanya that Van had gotten a death sentence, something dark and murky streaked through my chest.

All the same, my mind was astonishingly calm. It was really incredible.

But that was only a temporary feeling, coming from the feeling in this place that when I breathed in deeply I'd be able to calm my heart down.

I glanced toward the flora around me, allowing my tired eyes to relax.

I wasn't aware of it when reading my files, but when I stared at the green like this I realized that my eyes were already quite exhausted.

I needed to take care of my vision...in this world, there were no such things as contact lenses.

Thinking these thoughts, I felt satisfaction blossom in my heart because of the view I was seeing.

Of course Duke Armenia's family had its own gardener.

The beautiful view here was designed and maintained by them.

To be able to see such a beautiful sight so close by was something to be

grateful for.

I sunk into thought.

A long time ago I had received a letter from Mimosa.

It seemed that she found a man willing to date with marriage in mind.

Because she was afraid of the situation all around, she hesitated in taking the step. Shall we say that love's power is amazing or frightening?

I wrote a letter congratulating her and asking what kind of person her partner was, but I didn't receive a response after that.

Because of all the busyness with the Boltiques, I didn't remember to do anything else about it...perhaps it was worth writing another letter later.

I was thinking of this when Dida's silhouette appeared in my field of vision.

"Ah, Dida."

"Hey, Princess. Are you resting?"

"Yes."

"These files need to be handed to Sebastian. You can take a look first. It's about the future operations of the national guard. I'm about to go out, but Ryle will be back, so let him know if there's anything you need."

"All right. Are you leaving right now?"

"No...not immediately."

"If that's the case, you should sit down and rest too. How about some tea?"

"Then I'll help myself."

Dida sat down with a smile.

I glanced to the servant girl beside me. Before I could say anything she put down a new cup and poured some tea.